Reporting in Black communities: Early findings from focus groups with Black news consumers in four Canadian cities

Reportage dans les communautés noires : Premiers constats tirés de groupes de discussion avec des personnes noires consommatrices d'information dans quatre villes canadiennes

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ABSTRACT

This research note discusses the early findings of Phase 1 of the Reporting in Black Communities project. Situated in the Black Emancipatory Action Research approach, a liberation methodology and framework, Phase 1 consisted of focus groups with 39 Black news consumers across Toronto, Halifax, Montreal, and Edmonton to understand their perceptions and experiences with journalistic coverage. This note shares findings demonstrating that Black news consumers (1) overwhelmingly still see stereotypes of Black people in Canadian journalism, (2) continue to see a lack of diversity in coverage of Black communities, summarized as "bad or best" stories about crime or exceptionalism, (3) have not seen lasting changes in reporting following the "racial reckoning" of 2020, and (4) have experienced social, economic, community and health impacts as a result of journalists' coverage of Black communities. This research note describes preliminary findings, which will inform the creation of an evidence-based, community-informed resource to improve and inform reporting on Black communities, subsequently mitigating the harm and mistrust the Canadian journalism industry has perpetuated.

RÉSUMÉ

La présente note de recherche fait état des résultats préliminaires de la phase 1 du projet *Reportage dans les communautés noires.* Ancrée dans l'approche « Black Emancipatory Action Research » (recherche-action émancipatrice des Noirs), une méthodologie et un cadre de recherche libératoires, la phase 1 a consisté en des groupes de discussion réunissant 39 personnes noires consommatrices d'information à Toronto, Halifax, Montréal et Edmonton afin de mieux comprendre leurs perceptions et leurs expériences de la couverture journalistique. Les observations dans la présente note montrent que les personnes noires qui consomment l'information : 1) continuent, dans une large mesure, de voir des stéréotypes visant les personnes noires dans le journalisme canadien; 2) constatent toujours un manque de diversité dans la couverture des communautés noires, souvent réduite à des récits négatifs axés sur le crime et des récits inspirants d'exceptionnalisme; 3) n'ont pas observé de changements durables dans les pratiques de couverture depuis le « tournant racial » de 2020; et 4) subissent des répercussions sociales, économiques, communautaires et sur la santé attribuables à la couverture des communautés noires par les journalistes. Ces résultats préliminaires serviront à l'élaboration d'une ressource fondée sur des données probantes et éclairée par les communautés, afin d'améliorer et d'orienter la couverture des communautés noires et, ce faisant, d'atténuer les préjudices et la méfiance que l'industrie du journalisme au Canada a contribué à perpétuer.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by white Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin, Canadian journalists and their U.S. counterparts publicly announced the beginning of a "racial reckoning" in journalism (Chang et al., 2020; Chavez, 2020; Clark, 2022; Soon-Shiong, 2020). Racialized and non-racialized journalists publicly spoke out about the lack of support for Black journalists in newsrooms (Bennett, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Lapointe, 2020; Mattar, 2020; Newman-Bremang, 2020), as well as the failure to tell more fair and representative stories about Black communities. This framing of the "racial reckoning" as a new initiative to eradicate anti-Black racism drew criticism from Black journalists, activists, advocates and scholars (Blake, 2021; Levine, 2021; Moliere, 2021; Norris, 2020), given the decades-long battle by Black journalistics to change mainstream narratives, and the 19th-century abolitionist newspapers that helped shift public perception of Black people (Harewood, 2025; Nittle, 2025).

Coverage of Black communities in Canada has historically and overwhelmingly been negative, and focused on crime, sports or entertainment (Wortley et al.,1997; Henry & Tator, 2000). Its impact contributes to discrimination against Black people (Martis, 2021); stress and trauma when racial incidents causing harm or death are broadcast (Curtis et al., 2021; Monk, 2020); being passed over for jobs (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011); being viewed as inherently criminal (Kumi, 2005; Color of Change, 2015) or deserving of harsher criminal sentencing (Johnson, 1985); and being surveilled by civilians and police (Wortley et al., 1997).[1] Journalistic coverage perpetuates and exacerbates bias in everyday news consumers, and affects Black people's participation in Canadian society (Henry & Tator, 2000; Martis, 2021).

There was some follow-through to address anti-Black racism in journalism in the five years following Floyd's murder. Some newsrooms hired more Black journalists and organized diversity training, and collaborated to create fellowships and scholarships for Black journalists and students (CBC, 2020; Centennial College, 2021). Advisory boards were created to gather feedback from Black communities (CBC, 2023), and new courses were added at Canadian journalism schools, developed and taught by Black journalists including ourselves at Toronto Metropolitan University and Carleton University. Still, Canadian journalism's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion is lacking. According to the Canadian Association of Journalists' (2024) diversity survey, 3.9% of journalists in full-time, non-supervisory roles were Black. Sixty-six percent (66%) of media outlets participating in the survey still employ no Black journalists. Meanwhile, 74% of journalists were white, making up a larger proportion than the national population of 68.8% (Canadian Association of Journalists [CAJ], 2024). Though no equivalent Canadian study currently exists, Pew Research Center reports that 63% of Black adults still find that news about Black people is more negative than news about other racial groups, with 43% finding coverage still stereotypes Black people (2023).

As such, we developed Reporting in Black Communities to create a bilingual (French and English) evidence-based, Black community-informed guide, website, and resources for journalists,[2] students, and educators to report on Black communities in Canada with accuracy, dignity, and equity. Through findings and insights from discussions with Black news consumers, journalists, and newsroom leaders,[3] we aim to create the guide and reporting resources to increase journalists' preparedness and confidence to report on Black communities. In turn, this may help shift perceptions of Black communities, thereby improving the quality of their lives, and subsequently build trust and engagement from Black news consumers.

Our research involved two phases: 1) focus group discussions with Black news consumers[4] to understand how they perceive the nature

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1. Canada has produced substantially less research on the effects of news media on Black communities compared to the U.S. In tandem, both bodies of scholarship demonstrate the detrimental impacts of journalistic coverage on Black communities.
2. For the purposes of this study and project, the term journalist refers to reporters, editors, photographers, videographers, producers, news hunters, writers, hosts, and anyone who does editorial work in the broadcast, television, digital, print, and news industries.
3. Newsroom leaders refer to anyone who leads a team and makes editorial decisions.
4. Participants were selected from Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton, and Halifax.

and impact negative news coverage[5] has on their communities, and 2) interviews with non-Black journalists and newsroom leaders to understand their preparedness to report on Black communities.[6]

This research note focuses on the approach, methodology and early findings of Phase 1.

METHODS

Theoretical approach

Our theoretical approach is underscored by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and centred on Black Emancipatory Action Research (BEAR), a liberatory methodology and framework based on several lenses and research theories including Critical Race Theory, Feminist scholarship, Participatory Action Research, and Critical Africentricity. Coined by scholar Antwi Akom (2011), BEAR integrates a theory of structural racialization into ethnographic and participatory action research methods, underscoring the importance of collaborative and community-based empowerment, highlighting that "liberatory" research is based in shared conversation, interconnection of personal experience, and a cooperative analysis of possible solutions (Akom, 2011, p. 123-124). As such, CRT and BEAR informed our recruitment and focus group design.

Drawing from CRT and BEAR, our orientation recognizes that racism is perpetuated through individuals *and* systems and structures (Akom, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT highlights the importance of counternarratives to challenge dominant myths and stories, and encourages a focus on race to achieve fairness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). This supports our choice to have conversations with Black people in focus groups, and our goal to create a curated guide addressing their needs.

Recruitment

This research project was approved by research boards at both Toronto Metropolitan University (REB 2024-389) and Carleton University (#121452). We conducted focus groups[7] with Black news consumers in four cities with distinct histories and characteristics: (1) Edmonton, Alberta, the largest Somali-Canadian population outside of southern Ontario; (2) Halifax, Nova Scotia, the long-standing historic Black population in Canada; (3) Toronto, Ontario, the largest urban Black population in Canada; and (4) Montreal, Quebec, the country's largest French-speaking Black population. We aimed for eight to 10 participants per city.

Our team compiled a contact list of approximately 130 community organizations and post-secondary institutions. We designed bilingual recruitment postcards for physical distribution and emailed contacts to ask them to share or display the postcards. X and Instagram project accounts were created to share recruitment posts through our personal networks and on LinkedIn. All communications directed prospective participants to a recruitment website with project information and eligibility criteria. If potential participants were eligible based on the requirements, they could express interest by answering a Qualtrics pre-screen questionnaire.

Focus group design

Over 150 people expressed interest in the focus groups. We selected participants based on eligibility, then emailed invitation letters to them. If participants confirmed their attendance, we sent further instructions and a consent form. A total of 39 participants attended the focus groups across all cities.

All participants were Black, representing a spectrum of ethnic or cultural origins, with most identifying as Caribbean, West African or Canadian. Over half were between 23 and 35 years old.[8] Most participants consume news either online or through social media, with CBC as the

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5. We define news, news coverage, and news media as any journalistic media. This includes newspapers, magazines, podcasts and digital news. We define coverage and reporting as any journalistic or editorial content. This includes, but is not limited to, reporting, interviewing, editing, copyediting, and factchecking.
6. Non-Black journalists and newsroom leaders were interviewed in the same aforementioned cities.
7. This included some informal surveying with hands-up/hands-down counts.
8. These demographic details offer context to understand participants' experiences and perspectives, but are not intended to claim statistical representativeness or generalizability to all Black communities in Canada.

Prof. Eternity Martis (centre) and Prof. Nana aba Duncan (far right) speak to attendees, including Prof. Brian Daly (left), after presenting the Reporting in Black Communities project to journalism students and faculty at University of King's College in Halifax. Photo by Danielle Reid.

To avoid a sense of hierarchy and promote equity, we arranged tables in a circle and sat amongst participants rather than separately. Following focus group sessions, participants were given pens and an anonymous paper survey (Appendix A) with three questions prompting feedback on the focus group approach. They were then offered $50 in cash each.

We designed a set of 10 questions with several follow-ups (Appendix B), aligning with the study's objective. Analysis of the focus groups included coding for themes in alignment with the questions. Six themes emerged: (1) relationship to news; (2) perceptions of Blackness in news; (3) impact of news coverage; (4) perceptions of changes in news coverage since George Floyd's murder; (5) experiences with journalists; and (6) impact of equitable news coverage. As the study is ongoing, this research note includes early findings from Themes 2 to 5.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Blackness in the news

Stereotypes in Canadian news
Twenty-eight out of 39 (72%) believed Black people were not covered fairly in the news. All participants identified stereotypes in coverage of Black communities, using the words "criminal," "drug dealers," "lazy," "dangerous," "aggressive," "violent," "loud," "untrustworthy," "oversexualized," "inhuman," and "unintelligent" to describe these stereotypes.

"Bad or best" stories
When asked what kinds of stories they saw Black people represented in, participants' answers fell into the categories of crime, sports/entertainment, violence, and racial conflict.

> Positive narratives are there, but they don't often get into the deeper issues, like the impact of racial profiling on families or the psychological effects of racism. (Edmonton participant A)

Participants said the disproportionately negative stories meant the news overlooked the contributions, achievements, diversity, and resilience of Black communities.

most-mentioned media outlet, followed by CTV and Global News. The sample included healthcare providers, artists, social workers, journalists, mental health professionals, students, realtors, community leaders, professors, athletes, and more.

Given our aim for 8 to 10 participants per city, we divided each group in half over two consecutive days to allow for more discussion time. Where possible, we divided participants into groups of under or over 35, as youth are more likely to consume news on social media (The Media Insight Project, 2022; Kaiser & Partners, Inc., 2020). In keeping with the BEAR framework, we provided a culturally-affirming environment by catering from Black-owned restaurants, displaying a Ghanaian kente cloth, and playing reggae, jazz, afrobeats and soul during the sign-in and breaks.

Black neighbourhoods are only showcased for crime....There's no recognition of community organizing or cultural preservation....It's a missing component of humanizing Black communities. (Toronto participant A)

Many participants felt that when stories were positive, they focused on exceptionalism rather than everyday achievements. Participants expressed a desire for "day-to-day" stories while others specifically suggested more content showcasing Black people in diverse occupations, service pieces on how to access resources or information relating to Black issues, and stories about Black contributions to society.

Impact of news coverage

Impact on access to society

Nearly all participants indicated the one-dimensional portrayal of Black people, especially as criminals, has negatively affected their lives in some way, whether through seeking housing, employment, education, or healthcare; accessing social services; being in public spaces; in platonic or romantic relationships; engaging with news; or by affecting their mental health.

Anytime I have to find any place to live, it feels like an impossible mission....Every time Black people are portrayed in the news, it's often criminalized and this reinforces existing bias and prejudice. (Toronto participant B)

Several mentioned the news impacted how they viewed their own communities, including being afraid of certain Black neighbourhoods due to how they were covered. While it was hard for participants to quantify exactly how the news impacted their lives, they spoke about the "trickle down" effect that media can have on perpetuating and validating societal bias.

You start to believe...that you're not as good... that you don't belong. (Edmonton participant B)

Perceptions of changes in news coverage since George Floyd's murder

Journalism's 2020 racial reckoning

Most participants saw positive changes in how anti-Black racism, police brutality, and Black issues were covered by journalism outlets after the murder of Floyd. However, nearly all participants noted they saw no lasting, meaningful change.

It kind of feels like it was a performative thing, because I don't really see those stories as much any more, and I just don't know if it's created much long-term change. (Toronto participant C)

I didn't see any big difference in terms of news coverage....But I think systemically in newsrooms...they wanted to be seen like, 'We're hiring a DEI person. We're creating a Black unit.'...But they were pilot projects that didn't last because there was no genuine effort to actually make the changes. (Halifax participant A)

Experiences with journalists

Being interviewed by journalists

Sixty-four percent (64.1%) of participants had been interviewed by journalists before. Sixty percent (60%) had a positive experience, 32% had a negative experience and 8% were unsure/had no answer. Participants said the experience was positive if the reporter was prepared and knowledgeable, had a thorough request, asked appropriate questions, was kind and compassionate, followed up with the participant after the interview, invited the participant to contact them if they had any concerns or questions, quoted them in a fair manner, represented their story accurately, or was a Black journalist. Most felt more trust, comfort, and kinship with Black journalists due to the shared experience of anti-Black racism.

Negative experiences included being asked invasive and racist questions, being asked questions on air that the participant asked not to be included, and being asked to provide comments on behalf of the entire Black community. Several participants worried their stories would be

inaccurately represented, or had initial hesitations about participating in the interview. To note, many participants who had positive experiences with journalists had either been interviewed for light or "fluff" pieces or in some cases, knew the reporter.[9]

> They did a lot of pre-op with me. They interviewed two or three times beforehand.... They did some really good research. (Toronto participant D)

> I was interviewed in 2019 when my son was murdered. The reason I did the interview is because if I hadn't, they wouldn't have told his story from my perspective....I made a decision that if there's going to be any news media about his life...it's going to come from his mother. (Halifax participant B)

Trust in journalists

In terms of whether they trusted journalists, 43.6% said they were "unsure," 30.8% said "yes" and 25.6% said "no." Participants who were unsure felt that, while the role of journalism was fundamental to society, they were concerned about the behaviour, ethics, and conduct of journalists. They also expressed concern over the agendas and biases of journalists and news organizations.

> I should trust journalists because I am one and I want people to trust me. But I know that in order to do that, I always have to demonstrate that I'm different from the other journalists that they're used to. So I have to do that extra work because they have a valid perception of what journalists do. (Halifax participant C)

Those who responded "yes" expressed the necessity of journalists for a democratic society, especially in a highly polarized time, and trusted journalists' roles to tell the truth, inform, and educate.

> We have no choice because the media is one of the last standing guardrails of democratic life and without a free media, we very easily can slip into an authoritarian regime. (Montreal participant A)

DISCUSSION

Black communities in Canada continue to be deeply impacted physically, socially, mentally, and communally by news coverage. Concerningly, we noted the deep-rooted, daily impact that negative coverage has on participants' sense of self, belonging, and mental health.

Like Black Americans (Pew Research Center, 2023), Black people in Canada continue to see mostly negative news coverage of their communities and believe that journalists require more education about the issues Black people experience. In a survey of Black residents in the Greater Toronto Area, roughly two-thirds of participants felt that there wasn't enough representation of Black people in mainstream media, and what did exist was predominantly negative (The Black Experience Project, 2017). This demonstrates that while the journalism industry has improved its coverage of Black communities, the changes have not been sweeping or substantial enough for Black news consumers.

Significantly, Black participants described seeing their community represented in crime, sports and entertainment, the same areas identified in research conducted nearly 30 years ago (Wortley et al.,1997; Henry & Tator, 2000). Participants who saw increased coverage of Black communities tended to see it only during certain times of the year relating to Black events, such as Black History Month or Carnival season, or when police brutality goes viral. This shows that stories about Black communities are still reactive and subject to the "issue-attention cycle" (Downs, 1972, p. 38).

Some participants shared how negative coverage of Black people affects how they relate and engage with their own communities. We noted group discomfort when participants were asked to further expand on this question. This shows that Black people may be inadvertently perpetuating bias against their own community due to consuming consistent negative news coverage.

Contrary to the 2020 "racial reckoning" claimed by the journalism industry, it failed to make a lasting impact that resonates with Black communities and the stories they want to see (see also Tameez, 2025). Combined with the imbalanced racial makeup of Canadian newsrooms (CAJ, 2024), this suggests that the industry may not have the

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9.   In Halifax, the majority of participants said they had been interviewed, and nearly all by the same reporter. Given the city's smaller and historic community, participants noted there are few veteran Black journalists, so it is common to be interviewed by the same person.

comprehensive tools and education it requires to make proactive, enduring change in its journalistic practices and coverage.

Given that newsrooms are rarely representative of the multicultural communities they cover, community-informed journalism may be the critical component of creating long-term change. This framework believes journalism must be rooted in the community's needs, through "deep listening, collaboration and relationship building" with the communities it serves (Radcliffe et al., 2023, p. 4). A "bottom up" approach—collaborating with communities to create new beats, products and stories (Radcliffe et al., 2023, p. 6)—may help rebuild trust, improve community engagement, and mitigate harm among Black communities. A few newsrooms have adopted this approach through advisory boards, such as CBC Nova Scotia (CBC, 2023).

The diverse mix of participants' identities demonstrates there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to improving journalistic reporting of Black communities. It must take into account intersectionality, immigration, geography, and the legacy of slavery. For example, African Nova Scotian participants have a different relationship to slavery and racism than other Black participants. Black Caribbeans in Toronto have a different relationship to anti-Black racism than Somalians in Edmonton. Compared to Canadian-born participants, newcomers to Canada were less likely to see the same stereotypes in the news.

In each focus group, we noticed gratitude for the opportunity to speak about the impact of news, and anticipation for this project and its outcome. In the post-focus group survey, one Edmonton participant wrote "I was very pleased with the approach, I felt like I was asked the right questions and it made me reflect on Black people's representation in the media."

This interest demonstrates that despite decades of harm from the journalism industry, participants are still optimistic about Canadian journalism becoming more equitable and are willing to participate in the process of making it so. It also demonstrates that participants are enthusiastic about collaborating with newsrooms through a community-centered approach (Nelson et al., 2024; Radcliffe, 2023).

LIMITATIONS

The landscape of Black communities in Canada is vast and intersectional. Age, gender, news consumption, sexual orientation, mother tongue, religion, ethnicity and nationality all played a role in how each participant answered the questions. While we acknowledge how intersectionality creates an interlocking system of oppression in which each participant lives (Crenshaw, 1991), we did not practically engage this orientation throughout the study design. For example, we encouraged participants to state their gender in our focus group discussions, but did not require gender in the pre-screen questionnaire. Thus we cannot analyze our findings with this critical lens.

Another limitation was the project's digital-first approach. Several participants expressed difficulty corresponding and completing the consent form through email due to lack of comfort using the internet. In these cases we reached participants by phone or assisted them in-person at focus groups.

Finally, as we are academics and public-facing journalists who called on professional networks and local community organizations to assist with recruitment, this study may have yielded participants who self-selected due to personal or professional investment in the subject.

NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

Phase 1 findings reiterate the importance of collaboration with Black communities to understand the complex, multifaceted ways that journalistic practices harm an already marginalized community and consequently develop effective, accurate, and equitable reporting. As such, the Reporting in Black Communities project will use the discussions yielded in Phase 1 to inform the guide and reporting resources we are creating for journalists, journalism students, and educators.

We are in the process of completing analysis of discussions from both Phases 1 and 2. The research team will then (1) create a report of findings and recommendations; (2) send the report to participants and stakeholders for feedback and advice on the guide; and (3) implement feedback and create the guide, website and resources.

As the U.S. and its influence on Canada reverse

progress made on diversity, equity, inclusion, and race, the Reporting in Black Communities project will equip journalists with these comprehensive, community-informed tools to create systemic, long-term change to strengthen and educate generations of journalists and Black communities to come. 💬

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APPENDIX A: POST-FOCUS GROUP SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What was missing in today's conversation?
2. What is your impression of how we have approached this focus group?
3. Provide details if you can.What is one thing that should be in the resource Reporting in Black Communities that would mitigate harm against Black Communities in Canada?

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

(A) Relationship to the news

1. What is your relationship to the news these days?

(B) Perceptions of Blackness in the news

2. What is your impression of how Black people are covered in the news?
   a. By a show of hands only, do you believe Black people are fairly represented in the news?
3. When you see stories in the news about Black people, what are they usually about?
   a. What kinds of stories would you like to see?
4. Do you see stereotypes in the news about Black people?
   a. In one or two words, what are those stereotypes?

(C) Impact of news coverage

5. We are going to ask you a series of questions about whether the news influences your life *in some way,* past or present. Consider how the news, and these possible stereotypes, seep into our lives, values, and beliefs and affect how we interact with people and how they interact with us.
   a. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your ability to seek employment or housing in some way?
      i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
   b. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your social interactions in everyday life in some way?
      i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
   c. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your ability to be in public spaces in some way?
      i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?

    d. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your relationships (both romantic and platonic) in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
    e. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your ability to access social services in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
    f. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your ability to access healthcare in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
    g. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your ability to seek or maintain an education in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
    h. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences your mental health, well-being or self-esteem in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?
    i. By a show of hands, do you believe the news influences the way you relate to your community in some way?
        i. Does it affect you in a positive or negative way?

6. Can you share a specific example about how the news has influenced your life in the ways we just mentioned?

(D) Perceptions of changes in news coverage since George Floyd's murder
7. Think back to past coverage of Black people who were killed by police. What changes, if any, did you see in how journalists covered Black communities after the murder of George Floyd?

(E) Experiences with journalists
8. By a show of hands, have you ever been interviewed by a reporter?
    a. For those who said yes, what was your experience like?
9. By a show of hands, do you trust journalists?
    a. Why or why not? Please expand.

(F) Impact of equitable news coverage
10. Let's say we lived in a world where the news covered more fair and representative stories about Black communities. In a few words, how do you believe your life would be different?