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Opinion

Black voices are still largely absent from mainstream media. It's time for the industry to take a hard look at itself

By Shree Paradkar Race & Gender Columnist
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When The Voice of the Fugitive and the Provincial Freeman — both Black-owned newspapers for Black people — were operating in southwestern Ontario in the 1850s, Canadian society was still living with the violent vestiges of slavery from its own recent past and from the ongoing brutality south of the border.

White-owned newspapers didn't think it worth asking Black people to share their urgent, serious stories of life and death. That's likely why it's not common knowledge that Canada's first female publisher was a Black woman: Mary Ann Shadd Cary, who published the Provincial Freeman.

Almost a century later, the American civil rights movement in the 1960s offered another opportunity for a reckoning for white-owned media in Canada. Whether or not that introspection happened wasn't visible in newspaper pages or television screens; Black people had to continue to make their own space to tell their own stories in newspapers such as Contrast.

Time marched on. Canadians patted ourselves for opening our doors to non-white immigrants and for our multicultural policies, but we remained gatekeepers; we could count the number of Black journalists in newsrooms at any given time on the fingers of our hands. I challenge newsrooms to name their Black staff over the years and be part of their institutional memory.

Among permanent full-time hires in this newspaper in the '60s,'70s, '80s, '90s and '00s: Malcolm Johnson, Cecil Foster, Royson James, Phil Mascoll, Hamlin Grange, Bev Bowen, James Russell, Donovan Vincent, James Atkins, Ashante Infantry (who has long kept track of this list), Maureen Murray, Morgan Campbell. A toast to the original disrupters (Please let us know if any are missing.) Also, an acknowledgment of loss, of those who came through these doors in hope but were passed over. We see you all.

Soon North America crowned itself a post-racial society — a Black man became U.S. president! Social media blossomed. As social media prised open the information flow from us, Black voices began to be heard louder on digital platforms, forcing our own illusion making to come crashing down — and *still* there are only a few Black journalists in mainstream media.

It is in the past few months, at the end of this, the second decade of the 21st century, in the midst of a global pandemic, that we, the society, and we, the media, have been forced to yield to decades of petitions and pleas and protests by Black grassroots movements. Together we may have arrived, at long last, with a public reckoning of our own deep-seated anti-Black racism.

Don't anyone dare say slow down now, that change takes time.

Monday is World News Day, a fine day as any to take stock of some of the response to the massive outpouring of outrage around anti-Black racism.

Newsroom demographics have been so lopsided that newsrooms didn't want to share them, only recently agreed to do so, and are now hiring more non-white people to take the edge off the embarrassment.

Early in June, the Globe and Mail, CBC and The Canadian Press announced they were capitalizing B for Black. Good, but cue the slow clap. They didn't explain why it had taken them so long to act on a long-standing issue and whose requests for this change they had dismissed in the past.

The CBC suspended news anchor Wendy Mesley for saying the N-word. But it hid behind lawyerly statements of confidentiality when its botched handling of a previous usage of the word on "The Fifth Estate" (unrelated to Mesley) was raised.

According to a Vice News report, 12 Global News journalists who repeatedly raised concerns of racism were among those laid off in August.

What then do all the pretty words of acknowledging racism and pledges to "do better" ask of the news industry?

They require first acknowledging that the irresponsibility of exclusion allowed for white supremacist narratives to be entrenched in our society. Fully flawed politicians and slave owners with blood on their hands are cast as heroic leaders in our stories, stood up as statues in public spaces, their names dinned into our conscience as school names and street names.

The media let these biased decisions go unchallenged for years, but now when those statues are being brought down and street names asked to be changed, we claim to seek "both sides" of the issue in the name of a news value we call "balance."

A reckoning with our racism also demands a reckoning with our history, questioning especially the bits that comfort our image of ourselves.

Even before the pandemic, the world faced a convergence of crises: of migrants, of climate change, of anti-Black racism, of an oil-based economy, of white nationalism. Our newsrooms are peopled with journalists who are supposed to keep a finger on the pulse of society but are largely unaffected by any of these crises.

Imagine the privilege of claiming objectivity when a xenophobe runs for office, of the lack of outrage when a sitting premier calls "intersectionality" a kooky academic concept, of the luxurious pretence of innocence in asking the RCMP — a force notorious for clearing lands of its inhabitants and forcibly separating children from their families — "does systemic racism exist?"

A reckoning requires individual introspection by every reporter, editor, news producer and manager. It demands an unflinching look at the stories we choose as important, the sources and institutions we automatically trust to tell them, the language we prefer to use, the practices we consider the norm, the judgment of going "too far," "too much" or being "overly sensitive," the photographs we choose to tell a story, the reporters we tap.

It requires institutional introspection. Whom are we hiring, where are we hiring from, what are we asking during interviews? How are we making space not just for non-white people, but for the most marginalized among them? How are we de-escalating hostility in the newsroom, and how are we making room for ideas that challenge us? Whom do we view as capable of authority and how will we engage with feedback without centring on white feelings? How will we hold accountable those who stubbornly refuse to see how their precious "way we did things" actively harmed others?

And yes, an industry with otherwise world class standards now reeling from lack of trust in society should be reflecting on its blind spots, evaluating vaunted values of truth seeking and accuracy and asking itself: Whose truths? Who has been deeming them accurate, and why?

Shree Paradkar is a Toronto-based columnist covering issues around race and gender for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: @ShreeParadkar