The Demonization of Aboriginal Child Welfare Authorities in the News

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ABSTRACT This study compares news representations of Aboriginal child welfare agencies with those of provincial authorities such as BC's Ministry of Children and Family Development. News coverage of critical incidents involving children under the care of provincial bodies focused on systemic problems such as programs cuts, scarcity of resources and organizational deficiencies—conditions over which individual social workers had little control. In contrast, these contextual factors were largely absent from reportage of delegated Aboriginal agencies. Instead, most news reports and opinion pieces focused on blaming Aboriginal social workers and agency officials as well as questioning the competence of Aboriginal service providers in general. On the other hand, opinion pieces written by Aboriginal people introduced structural issues and contextual factors not included in the news.

KEYWORDS Discourse analysis; News frame; Script; Stereotype; Aboriginal child welfare; Devolution; Xyolhemeylh; Stó:lō Nation

RÉSUMÉ Cette étude compare des représentations de nouvelles des agences d'assistance sociale d'enfant indigènes à ceux des autorités provinciales telles que le ministère du développement d'enfant et de famille de Colombie Britannique. Le reportage des incidents critiques faisant participer des enfants sous le soin des corps provinciaux s'est concentré sur des problèmes systémiques tels que les coupes de programmes, la pénurie des ressources et les insuffisances ou l'excédent d'organisation de conditions que les différents ouvriers sociaux ont eu peu de commande. En revanche, ces facteurs contextuels étaient absents du reportage des agences indigènes déléguées. Au lieu de cela, rapports de nouvelles concentrés sur blâmer les ouvriers et les fonctionnaires sociaux indigènes d'agence et remettre en cause la compétence des fournisseurs de service indigènes en général. D'autre part, avis pièces écrites par les peuples autochtones a introduit les questions structurelles et facteurs contextuels ne pas inclus dans l'actualité.

MOT CLÉS Analyse du discours; Cadres des nouvelles; Scénario; Stéréotype; Assistance sociale d'enfant indigènes; Délégation; Xyolhemeylh; Nation Stó:lō

This article represents the first study of mainstream news media's framing of critical incidents involving Aboriginal children under the care of child welfare authorities. I compare news coverage of two cases where Aboriginal children have died, one

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involving a child under the care of British Columbia’s children’s ministry (Ministry of Children and Family Development [MCFD]) and another involving a child under the care of Xyolhemeylh, the Stó:lō Nation’s delegated child and family services agency. News discourse about the Xyolhemeylh case is steeped in the public idiom, draws upon familiar scripts about the behaviour of Aboriginal people and constructs the Aboriginal agency as a bastion of incompetence and waste. On the other hand, news coverage of the MCFD case incorporates nuanced discussions about a variety of topics not included in news discourse of the Xyolhemeylh case, including high caseloads and the connection between poverty and child abuse and neglect.

News Media and Aboriginal people
Aboriginal people are at a critical juncture in their relationship with other Canadians. Across the country, they have been campaigning to regain control over child welfare, education, and other sectors from provincial governments. In British Columbia, First Nations have been negotiating tripartite treaty agreements with federal and provincial governments that implement significant transfers of land, resources, and authority. Clearly, Aboriginal people are moving away from the relationship of dependency codified in the Indian Act (1876) and implemented historically through a variety of state policies and practices.

Through the framing of issues and by setting agenda, news media have an opportunity to equip members of the public with a basic literacy about Aboriginal issues. The importance of news media as a source of public knowledge about Aboriginal issues is heightened in light of the public education system’s abdication of its responsibility to inform Canadians about the history and context of Aboriginal issues (Dupuis, 2002). Yet many contemporary issues such as residential school healing initiatives or preventative child welfare programs are accorded scant coverage or ignored altogether by the press. Maurice Switzer, former media director for the Assembly of First Nations believes that few news outlets even consider “Aboriginal affairs to be a subject worthy of attention” (quoted in Fleras & Kunz, 2001, p. 176).

While some bread and butter Aboriginal issues fly under the radar of mainstream media, situations that involve disputes between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal governments are deemed newsworthy, often attracting intense scrutiny in the press. Conflicts over economic resources and/or institutional authority are routinely framed in terms that are unsympathetic to Aboriginal interests.

The connection between negative news coverage and “more stringent” Canadian government policy is well-established (Callahan & Callahan, 1997). Social policy affecting Aboriginal people is not created in a vacuum; public opinion is a key factor that politicians, bureaucrats, and other stakeholders consider in their formulations. In spite of the roles news media play in setting the bounds of debate for Aboriginal issues, shaping the development of government policy, and influencing the ability of fledging Aboriginal institutions to fulfill their mandates, until relatively recently, communications researchers paid little attention to news coverage of Aboriginal issues. That began to change in 1990 with the standoff at Oka, a situation that proved to be a major flashpoint in contemporary relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Roth (1992, 1995), Skea (1993-94), and Winter (1992) have contributed
valuable analyses of dominant media framing of the Oka events. Since then, other communications researchers have furnished groundbreaking studies on a range of Aboriginal issues, notably Henry and Tator (1999), Furniss (2001), and Lambertus (2004). More recently, Harding (2008) concluded that news coverage of Aboriginal child welfare issues is largely unsympathetic to Aboriginal interests and replete with new and emerging stereotypes.

**Methodology**

Using a case study approach, I demonstrate how meaning about Aboriginal child welfare matters is shaped in the news. This allows me to provide a tangible, detailed assessment of how dominant views are reproduced in a complete set of news texts about an issue in a specific time period. I address three primary research questions through the analysis of 51 news items published in a national broadsheet, two major dailies, and three community newspapers in 2002, 2003, and 2005.

**Research questions**

The first question is how are critical incidents involving a child under the care of a delegated Aboriginal child welfare agency framed in breaking news coverage? To address this, I conduct a detailed study of news stories about the death of an Aboriginal child under the care of Xyolhemeylh, a delegated Aboriginal child welfare agency. On September 21, 2002, the body of Chassidy Whitford was found on the Lakahahmen reserve near Mission, BC. At the time of her death, she was in the custody of her father, Shawn Mackinaw, who was arrested a few days after the discovery of his daughter’s body. A little over a year later, he pled guilty to a charge of criminal negligence causing death. While Chassidy was not originally from Lakahahmen, she was Aboriginal as her father is a member of the Ermineskin band of the Cree Nation in Alberta.

Another key question is whether this framing changes over time. I examine a second series of news stories about the same case, published approximately one year after the story broke. By analyzing two sets of texts about the same story one year apart, I am able to look at the diachronic dimensions of specific discourses, and to generalize about broad patterns in coverage.

This study also assesses whether this “sober second assessment” of child welfare tragedies is applied even-handedly to events involving provincial child welfare authorities and Aboriginal ones. I compare news coverage of the Whitford case with that of an Aboriginal child who died while under the care of BC’s provincial children’s ministry. While Savannah Hall’s death in a Prince George foster home in January 2001 received minimal press coverage at the time, a coroner’s review of her case held more than four years after her death attracted sustained media attention. The coroner ruled that the child’s death was a homicide and issued 26 recommendations, 17 of which were directed to MCDF (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, November 7, 2007).

Communications researchers have employed this “paired example” approach to representations of polarized situations involving parties with divergent interests. Most notably, Herman and Chomsky (1988) have used this method to illuminate variations in American media treatments of foreign policy issues involving official “allies” and “enemies” of the United States.
Textual Analysis

In comparing news coverage of two cases of Aboriginal children dying under the care of child welfare authorities, I draw upon both qualitative and quantitative methods of textual analysis. The first part of this study comprises a traditional content analysis of headlines, while the second half furnishes a detailed critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1988) of news texts.

Communications researchers have traditionally employed content analysis to appraise key features of news content and trace their implications for the public image of specific social groups (Bailey & Hackett, 1997). Headlines direct audiences’ attention to what are considered prominent semantic features of news texts. While headlines sometimes summarize a news story, they are more likely to highlight one aspect of the story above others. Lambertus (2004) points out that headlines, along with lead paragraphs, are the textual features that readers are “most likely” to remember when defining issues and events at a later date. Headlines, which are usually written by specialized editors and not by reporters, serve to reinforce certain elements of news stories while having an additive effect on their overall meaning. As such, they may be analyzed relatively independently from news texts since they “constitute an important unit of meaning in themselves; cumulatively, headlines can create impressions of events and groups even for readers who do not read accompanying articles” (Hackett, 1993, p. 61). Because they contain potent and highly compressed information that cues readers’ interpretations of news issues and events, a content analysis of headlines may yield important clues about news frames, semantic strategies, linguistic techniques, and other features of discourse.

While content analysis allows researchers to make generalizations based on the frequency with which certain textual elements recur, it does not allow for in-depth, nuanced reading of texts. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, allows for a fine-grained, interpretive analysis of meaning. It is well suited to the study of the representation of people of colour and minority populations. Several recent studies on news coverage of Aboriginal issues have employed this method (Lambertus, 2004; Henry & Tator, 2002; Furniss, 2001). Using discourse analysis to complement traditional content analysis enhances the researcher’s ability to make inferences about news content. By correlating data on the recurrence of key textual elements with a nuanced analysis of which discourses are privileged and which are contained, researchers can better assess the conventionality of news texts.

Breaking news coverage of a critical incident

Following the September 21, 2002, discovery of the body of Chassidy Whitford, an Aboriginal child under the care of Xyolhemeylh, 23 news stories appeared in editions of the National Post, Vancouver Sun, and the Province as well as three community newspapers: Abbotsford Times, Chilliwack Times, and Mission City Record. The first news story considered here, “Tot’s body found near Mission,” appeared in the Province on September 24, 2002, while the last article, “Chassidy’s death sparks program review,” was published in the Abbotsford Times on October 18, 2002.

Reading between the headlines

Approximately half of the headlines (11 of 23) associate the child’s death with a dis-
tinctly Aboriginal locale or institution. Framing the story as one about the death of an Aboriginal child on reserve furnishes a familiar context for readers. First, the victim is associated with a population that has long been stereotyped as victims (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), 1996). Second, the crime scene is identified as an “Aboriginal community” or a “reserve,” venues that have long associations in the media with a variety of extreme social conditions, including crime, poverty, and violence. The attachment of a racial label to this story limits readers’ interpretative choices. Addressing the racialization of crime in 1970s Britain, critics observed:

Labels are important, especially when applied to dramatic public events. They not only place and identify those events; they assign events to a context. Thereafter the use of the label is likely to mobilize this whole referential context, with all its associated meanings and connotations (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Robert, 1978, p. 19).

While it is inevitable that the location of a crime scene will be included in news stories, certain headline references to Aboriginality seem gratuitous. For example, one Vancouver Sun headline reads, “Tot’s death sparks review of native child agency: Could more have been done to save her life?” Every year, dozens of children die while under the care of provincial child welfare authorities. It seems that the story is somehow more newsworthy because the child died while under the care of a “native” child welfare agency as opposed to a non-Native authority. The headline quickly establishes the Aboriginality of the institution as news, when perhaps the most relevant news is that a child died while under the care of the child welfare system. While the first half of the headline establishes the Aboriginality of the institution as news, when perhaps the most relevant news is that a child died while under the care of the child welfare system. While the first half of the headline establishes the Aboriginality of the institution caring for the child, the second half raises the possibility that the agency may bear responsibility for the child's death. A number of other headlines suggest that the Aboriginal child welfare agency entrusted with the care of the child acted inappropriately. Two days after the story broke, headlines began signalling that Xyolhemeylh may have been at least partly cul-

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<td>External child agency review will be done: Lakahahmen FN Chief Susan McKamey assured review of Xyolhemeylh will be conducted</td>
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<td>Tot's death sparks review of native child agency: Could more have been done to save her life</td>
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<td>Death leads to review: But not of Xyolhemeylh program</td>
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pable for what happened. One headline states that the agency ignored an important report; others suggest that the program or even the entire agency was to be reviewed (in fact, it was only the agency’s handling of this particular case that was targeted for review); and another declares that the child would “be alive today” if only the agency “had done more to help her” (see Figure 1).

Critical discourse analysis of news texts
News coverage of this case reflects two main cultural scripts. Initial reports drew on a venerable script about Aboriginal people, that of the routine Aboriginal crime story. This script invokes the stereotype of Aboriginal people as victims: in this case, victims of themselves. Two days after the story broke, the initial script was subsumed by a second that has emerged in recent years—a tragedy caused by the incompetence of an Aboriginal child welfare agency.

While in this case, news reports invariably assign race to Aboriginal actors with any connection to the daughter, father, family, community, or child welfare agency, the ethnicity or race of non-Aboriginal actors generally goes unmentioned. Eleven of 23 headlines establish an Aboriginal connection to this tragedy. These signifiers include references to the child welfare agency, the locale of the crime (e.g., “First Nation,” “reserve,” “Indian band,” “band,” “native community”), and actors associated with the local First Nation (“Native leader,” “Chief,” “Stó:lō leaders”). The body of all but one of the news texts associates this story with Aboriginality.

Clearly, the Aboriginality of the agency, its employees, and the Stó:lō Nation is hypervisible. Jiwani (2006) argues that in coverage of the missing and murdered women of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, representations of Aboriginal women “oscillate between invisibility and hyper-invisibility: invisible as victims of violence and hypervisible as deviant bodies” (p. 899). Similarly, in news coverage of child welfare, Aboriginal agencies are hypervisible as wasteful, incompetent institutions, but invisible as underfunded, yet resourceful and innovative institutions. Dan Ludeman, former executive director of Xyolhemeylh, the Stó:lō Nation’s child and family services agency, notes the tendency of the media to pay attention to Aboriginal people only in crises and omit “positive” developments. He recalls when the news media were running numerous stories suggesting that foster parents were unhappy with his agency. At that same time, Xyolhemeylh held a foster parent appreciation gathering that attracted 300 people, an “extraordinary number for that type of event, which did not get any ink” (Ludeman, 2006).

The hypervisibility of Aboriginal agencies and actors in child welfare is especially problematic given that such actors are only visible when bad things happen. This is especially true of delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies since they are relatively new institutions about which the general public knows little. News audiences may have few interpretive options available to them.

Script #1: The routine Aboriginal crime story
The crime story has been described as the quintessential news story. Hall et al. (1978) suggest that crime is news “because its treatment evokes threats to, but also reaffirms, the consensual morality of the society” (p. 66). Not all crimes attract the attention of the news media, only those that have certain defining and dramatic characteristics. In
the context of Canada’s multicultural society, one of those characteristics is “interracial or intercultural” (Henry & Tator, 2002). News coverage of crime involving Aboriginal people and other racial or ethnic minorities has been noted to exhibit certain double standards. Fleras and Kunz (2001) write that a crime committed by a White person is “framed as individual aberration while a black offender is defined as typical of the community at large” (p. 53). Grenier (1992) found that news reports about Aboriginal people frequently associate them with conflict.

In addition to race and culture, “class” figures prominently in many crime stories. Jiwani (2006) writes that the attention paid to race and class in crime reporting is not surprising given the state’s “tendency to police crimes associated with the poor and with racial minority groups” (p. 47). News reports about crimes committed on reserves meet both of these criteria as extreme poverty affects many of these communities. While class is not the focus of this article, race and class intersect in the news coverage of both cases studied here and in many other news stories involving Aboriginal people. A major study conducted for Health Canada has found that poverty is implicated in all forms of child neglect and abuse (Trocmé & Wolfe, 2001). While the most common reason for child protection investigations involving non-Aboriginal children is exposure to domestic violence, for Aboriginal children it is neglect (Trocmé, 2005). Furthermore, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in Canada’s child welfare systems can be explained primarily by the “poverty, poor housing and parental substance abuse” affecting First Nation communities (Petrowski, 2009). The low socio-economic status of many Aboriginal families is attributable in no small part to the legacy of state policies of racism and economic marginalization. Nevertheless, news discourse about Aboriginal child welfare in general, and these two cases in particular, omits any discussion of class, poverty and other socio-economic factors.

This story first broke in the Province under the headline “Tot’s body found near Mission” on September 24, 2002, three days after the discovery of the girl’s body. The Aboriginality of the victim is immediately established (she is identified as “a member of the Lakahahmen native band”), as is the locale where the body was found (“on the reserve”) (Jiwa & Spencer, 2002, p. A3). Elements of a stereotypical crime story are present, including a sense of mystery (“Mission RCMP are investigating the mysterious death of a toddler”), macabre clichés (“body was found... in a shallow grave,” emotional testimonials to the dramatic impact of the death on the victim’s kin (“It’s definitely devastating”), and finally, the authoritative voice of the police (who are “following a number of leads”) (p. A3). These details were repeated in other articles during the first three days of news coverage. The reference to the child’s body being discovered “in a shallow grave” is included in more than half of the news stories. Even before the death was described as a homicide, reporters paraphrased the police as saying they “would not rule out foul play” (p. A3).

The next day, the crime story continued to unfold in the pages of the National Post and Vancouver Sun. Police in Alberta had arrested the child’s father, Shawn Mackinaw, from the Ermineskin band of the Cree Nation. The headline in the Vancouver Sun, “Baby’s death stuns native community,” emphasizes the impact on the Aboriginal community (Claxton, 2002, p. B1). The use of “baby” in the headline
as opposed to descriptors in other articles such as “tot,” “toddler,” “child,” or “girl” heightens the tragedy by emphasizing the victim’s vulnerability. This article also contradicts the earlier Province assertion that the child was a member of the local First Nation: “Neither the girl nor her father were Lakahahmen band members” (p. B1).

On September 26, the Vancouver Sun reported that the father had been charged in his daughter’s death and the article assumed all the dimensions of a crime story. This story references the impact of the child’s death on non-Aboriginal members of the community: “The band rents mobile homes to non-natives on the reserve in a site called Nicomin Village Park and many who live there said they were shocked by the girl’s death” (Pemberton, 2002, p. B1). This is one of the few times the ethnicity of anyone other than Aboriginal actors is signified. The reporter interviews a local non-Aboriginal resident who expresses concern for the safety of her children. One implication of including the ethnicity of these tenants is that the violence, so “endemic” to Aboriginal communities, becomes even more newsworthy when non-Aboriginal people are affected. This suggests that Aboriginal people not only victimize their own but also pose a threat to “non-natives.”

Script #2: Tragedy caused by the “incompetence” of an Aboriginal child welfare agency

Two days after the story was first published in the Province, it developed a new twist—more than one guilty party is implicated. A quote in the Province headline hints that the girl’s father is not the only one who bears responsibility for her death: “Did baby Chastity have to die?: ‘She was a beautiful little child, and if the people responsible for her could have done more to help her, she’d be alive today’” (Fournier & Grindlay, 2002, p. A3). In this story, residents of the reserve question and “other members of the Stó:lō Nation” question “why the Stó:lō child and family service agency Xyolhemeylh, which had concerns about the little girl, didn’t do more to save her life” (p. A3). The first resident is named and photographed in the story; the others are identified as a neighbour, a Lakahahmen teenager, and Soowahlie Chief Doug Kelly.

From this point forward, a new discourse emerges—that of an incompetent, possibly corrupt, Aboriginal agency failing to protect one of its own. The Province had already begun its own investigation, focused not on the father’s role, but on Xyolhemeylh:

‘We found a little girl that passed away. As a result of the investigation we have laid a charge in reference to improperly interfering with human remains,’ Robinson said. ‘That’s what I’m telling you at this time.’ But a Province investigation has found that Chastity’s [sic] misery in the Lakahahmen home was an open secret on reserve. Neighbours say that Shawn Mackinaw was her father and that he arrived several months ago from Alberta to visit his uncle, who was living with a Lakahahmen band member who herself has two young children. Brandy, the woman with whom Shawn Mackinaw was staying with, is the niece of Lakahahmen Chief Susan McKamey, who told the Province yesterday: ‘There were never any questions raised about the health of the child.’ But The Province has learned that neighbours were very concerned about the child’s well-being, and as a
result of their calls, the Stó:lō agency Xyolhemeylḥ was called in to examine
the girl (Fournier & Grindlay, 2002, p. A3; emphasis added).

Implicit in the use of the cliché “open secret” is that if most residents were aware
that something was amiss in the child’s home, then surely Xyolhemeylḥ, whose man-
date requires it to be fully informed about the circumstances of its charges, ought to
know. The repetition of the conjunction “but” signals that the newspaper is contest-
ing the RCMP’s sole attribution of responsibility to an individual. It also casts doubt
on the Chief’s denial that the First Nation had any reason to be concerned about the
child’s safety. The mention, in the same sentence, of the Chief’s kinship to someone
living in the house of the accused—not much of a coincidence in a small community
of large extended families—serves to undercut her credibility. After all, she cannot be
objective if she is so closely connected to the people involved in this crime.

The rest of the article focuses on the conduct of the First Nation and its child wel-
fare agency:

[Xyolhemeylḥ Manager] Ludeman insisted Chief McKamey will not be
involved in the internal review of what led to Chastity’s death. But neigh-
bours say Xyolhemeylḥ should have probed deeper into Chastity’s plight and
not sent her back to the home on the Lakahahmen reserve (Fournier &

The third usage of “but” signals that the Province is questioning the veracity of
statements made by Aboriginal officials. Unnamed neighbours, whose opinions have
already been heavily paraphrased, are now being constructed as child protection
experts, second-guessing the actions of Xyolhemeylḥ.

In the same story, space is afforded to a Stó:lō leader critical of the Stó:lō Nation
and of Xyolhemeylḥ itself. Soowahlie Chief Doug Kelly alleges that Bob Hall, the Stó:lō
Nation Grand Chief, “installed himself in office” and that Xyolhemeylḥ is not main-
taining “professional standards” (p. A3). Kelly’s choice of words about the Stó:lō
leader suggest that his criticisms are related to a larger dispute within the Nation itself.
Since there is no mention of the political schism affecting the Stó:lō at the time, this
story does not afford readers a meaningful context for the criticisms of Xyolhemeylḥ
by opponents of the Stó:lō Nation administration.3

The article concludes with a reference to an “independent evaluation” of
Xyolhemeylḥ two years previous that concluded that of 41 child protection and
guardianship files reviewed:

72.3 per cent did not have a plan of care on file and 83%, or 24 files, did not
have an immediate safety assessment on file ... or even a risk assessment. Last
year, Xyolhemeylḥ received $3.3 million in funding from federal Indian Affairs
and $6.9 million from Victoria (Fournier & Grindlay, 2002, p. A3).

The story would have been more informative for readers if these figures had been
placed in the context of child protection work in general, and Aboriginal child welfare
agencies in particular. Low completion rates for risk assessments may be more attrib-
utable to high caseloads resulting from chronic underfunding than to the incompe-
tence of individual workers or agencies. Walmsley (2006) reports that MCFD child
protection social workers cite excessive workloads as having “a major impact on the quality of their practice” (p. 67). They reported caseloads ranging from 40 to 92. Walmsley points out that the Child Welfare League of America recommends a caseload of 20. He concludes that excessive caseloads result in “superficial intervention” and a “reactive” style of practice that typically precludes having the time to complete risk assessments (p. 67). Workers for Aboriginal agencies face additional pressures:

Another pressure confronting Aboriginal organizations is the BC MCFD’s ‘off-loading’ of Aboriginal youth onto an Aboriginal child welfare organization. Previously these youth were in the care of MCFD, but they are now being returned to Aboriginal communities ... This trend can be viewed positively as recognizing the responsibility of the Aboriginal community to care for its children. At the same time, when children have particular needs but the Aboriginal community does not have the services to meet them, then this trend creates a condition of ‘responsibility without resources’ (Walmsley, p. 60).

Furthermore, newspaper readers may have limited understanding of the precarious nature of child welfare work with people living in poverty. The challenges of providing these services to economically strained Aboriginal communities are further complicated by the fact that Aboriginal agencies receive significantly less funding than their provincial counterparts. In a complaint filed with the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Cindy Blackstock (2009), Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, notes that Aboriginal child welfare agencies receive 22% less funding than provincial agencies.

In the absence of any context for the figures cited in the Province article, readers—especially those unfamiliar with the nature of child protection work in the province—may regard this as conclusive evidence of Xyolhemeylh’s incompetence. By immediately following this indictment of the agency’s performance with a reference to its annual funding ($10.2 million), the newspaper, the newspaper reinforces a familiar stereotype: Aboriginal people and institutions squandering vast sums of “taxpayers’ money. References to the magnitude of the agency’s government funding are included in stories in this newspaper as well as the Vancouver Sun.

In keeping with the theme of Aboriginal people “wasting” large sums of money, the next day the Province ran a story that included a reference to the royalties received by Chassidy’s father: “Mackinaw, 21, is a member of the wealthy Alberta Ermineskin band, whose members receive several thousand dollars in oil and gas royalties when they turn 21.” How these details are relevant to this story is open to conjecture. One “common sense” implication is that the combination of young Aboriginal men and large sums of money is bound to lead to “trouble.” Furthermore, the inclusion of Xyolhemeylh’s budget details about the extent of Xyolhemeylh’s budget and Mackinaw’s share of his band’s royalties play into a common misconception propagated in the news, namely that Aboriginal people and other minorities are “well taken care of” (Henry & Tator, 2002).

The need for a review of Xyolhemeylh became a focus of several news stories. From the outset, the agency declared that an independent review into the handling of this particular case would be conducted according to the standard procedure in any
case involving a child's death. However, a number of news texts imply that the entire program was suspect and subject to review. Consider the four headlines that reference the planned review (see Figure 2).

Three of these headlines erroneously state that the agency itself or its child protection program will be scrutinized. Unfortunately, neither the death nor the serious injury of a child under the care of a child welfare authority in British Columbia (or in Canada, for that matter) is a rare event. It is one thing to argue that the death of a child under care justifies a review of actions taken and procedures followed in that particular case. It is quite another to suggest that an overall program review is needed.

Discourse about the child's death is grounded in stereotypical assumptions about Aboriginal people. While news reports construct an Aboriginal child welfare agency as incompetent, they furnish little information about the general context of Aboriginal child welfare and the constraints and challenges facing fledgling Aboriginal agencies.

(Not so) sober second thoughts
Delegated child welfare programs represent crises for dominant political and economic interests since they challenge accepted practices of mainstream institutions and necessitate significant transfers of resources from taxpayers to Aboriginal people. Political crises have been described as “moments of truth, revealing characteristics which are latent during more ‘normal’ times” (Hacket & Zhao, 1994, p. 509.). When those crises are seen to be related to issues of race or ethnicity, news media may revert to a “default mode,” in which “advances” in inclusiveness and tolerance in reporting are exposed as superficial.

The initial coverage of the Xyolhemeylh case is illustrative of media at their most reactive. While the death of an Aboriginal child may represent a routine event for some reporters, one feature of this story that was atypical in 2002 was that this child died while under the care of a newly delegated Aboriginal child welfare authority. News reports during the first two weeks of coverage characterized the agency as irresponsible and dangerously incompetent.

However, is it conceivable that if media interest in this story were to endure for a significant period, the reportage might “evolve”? That is, later news reports might rely less on stereotypes, move away from blaming individuals, and include a wider range of sources and contextual factors. With this hypothesis in mind, I analyzed the two

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<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tot’s death sparks review of native child agency: Could more have been done to save her life</td>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
<td>Oct. 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>External child agency review will be done: Lakahahmen First Nation Chief Susan McKamey assured review of Xyolhemeylh will be conducted</td>
<td>Mission City Record</td>
<td>Oct. 3</td>
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<td>Chassidy’s death sparks program review</td>
<td>Abbotsford Times</td>
<td>Oct. 18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death leads to review: But not of Xyolhemeylh program</td>
<td>Chilliwack Times</td>
<td>Oct. 18</td>
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Vancouver dailies’ coverage of developments in the same case that took place nearly a year after the child’s death. The first story that references an MCFD report on the case was published in the Province on September 5, 2003. Nine additional news items were published in that paper and the Vancouver Sun in the twelve weeks following the initial news story (see Figure 3).

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<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vancouver Sun</td>
<td>Sept. 5</td>
<td>Grannad of dead tot furious he must apply for promised report into tragedy</td>
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<td>Sept. 25</td>
<td>Grannad calls tot’s death review ‘coverup’</td>
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<td>Sept. 26</td>
<td>Native leaders back Chassidy death probe</td>
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<td>Oct. 28</td>
<td>Dead baby’s kin riled that dad will duck jail</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oct. 30</td>
<td>‘We won’t risk our culture, identity’</td>
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<td>Nov. 7</td>
<td>Sto:lo Agency blamed in child’s death</td>
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<td>Nov. 9</td>
<td>Sto:lo members need input in decisions affecting native children, families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Province</td>
<td>Nov. 4</td>
<td>Great care is needed to bring Indian children back home</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nov. 7</td>
<td>Child’s death prompts changes to Sto:lo program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov. 28</td>
<td>4500 Aboriginal children in care face uncertain future</td>
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Follow-up stories versus breaking coverage

The most striking difference between the two sets of data was the inclusion of Stó:lō voices in the latter news stories. Three out of the 10 items were authored by Stó:lō writers. They include an opinion piece, a letter-to-the-editor by Soowahlie Chief Doug Kelly, and an opinion piece by Stó:lō Grand Chief Clarence Pennier. These writers reference a number of issues and contextual factors that are not mentioned in breaking news coverage nor in follow-up news stories. Both place the child’s death in the context of their people’s need to break free from the Indian Act and gain more autonomy over their affairs, including child welfare. In “We won’t risk our culture, identity” (2003, A22), Pennier ties the cultural survival of Aboriginal people to their ability to maintain children within their communities. He argues that the residential school system and the “Sixties Scoop” caused Aboriginal people’s contemporary social malaise and notes that “relentless media coverage has hindered efforts to restore balance” (p. A22) to the Xyolhemeylḥ program.

In his opinion piece, Kelly argues that focussing on “worker case management, protocols and standards” will not solve the larger issues affecting Stó:lō communities such as “poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, alcoholism and drug dependencies” (p. A24). He advocates for more, not less, power for Aboriginal child welfare agencies. Kelly concludes that problems with Xyolhemeylḥ have more to do with “constraints emerging from [provincial] legislation and policies” (p. A24), which define how child protection matters are delegated to Aboriginal child welfare agencies than with existing agency policies, procedures and standards.

In contrast, the seven items not authored by Stó:lō writers ignored these larger
issues. Nor were other structural factors affecting the provision of services, such as funding formula or high caseloads, included in news discourse. Instead, these stories focused on the culpability of Aboriginal people or Xyolhemeylh officials for the child’s death. Singled out for blame were Chief Maureen Chapman (in charge of Xyolhemeylh), Executive Director Dan Ludeman, Xyolhemeylh “staff” in general, and the agency as a whole. In one Province story, reporter Fournier describes Chapman as one of the Stó:lō “chiefs criticized for going on expensive retreats and misusing credit cards” (“Native leaders back Chassidy death probe,” 2003, p. A8). In another article, the same reporter notes that Ludeman “overruled temporary foster parents who begged to keep Chassidy in their care, pointing to injuries, obvious signs of neglect and fearfulness of her father” and that he “has since resigned” (“Dead baby’s kin riled that Dad will duck jail,” 2003, A3). The headline of the last column, “4,500 aboriginal children in care face an uncertain future,” suggests that all children cared for by Aboriginal authorities are at risk. In his column, Joey Thompson argues that because Xyolhemeylh is “seriously deficient,” there is good reason to be concerned about the transfer of children from provincial care to all of BC’s delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies (2003, p. A5). He adds, “And where were the staff who slipped up so badly in the months leading up to Chassidy’s death?”

Thompson (2003) presents no evidence to suggest there is any reasonable cause to be “concerned” about the management or service delivery of the 22 other delegated child welfare agencies in BC, which vary significantly in structure and scope. His argument seems to rest on a single ethnocentric, and inductive, proposition: if one organization managed and staffed by Aboriginal people is “incompetent,” it is likely that other Aboriginal-managed agencies are also deficient. Underlying the columnist’s expression of concern for the welfare of these children is an assumption that they are safer with MCFD than they would be under the care of Aboriginal agencies. Yet this does not appear to be supported by the available evidence about provincial ministry services. The negative impact of excessive caseloads has been discussed earlier, and the high number of injuries and deaths affecting MCFD charges is well documented (see Hughes, 2006).

A semiotic concept, which traces its origins to the ancient Greek word metonomia, is helpful in understanding the symbolic significance of the association of one “dysfunctional” child welfare agency with Aboriginal child welfare authorities in general. Metonymy is a rhetorical device where a part of something is used to represent the whole (Jakobson & Halle, 1956). Media theorist John Fiske (1990) acknowledges that while it is inevitable that metonyms will be used in representations of reality, the problem is that the arbitrariness of their selection “is often disguised or at least ignored, and the metonym is made to appear a natural index and thus is given the status of the ‘real,’ the ‘not to be questioned’” (p. 96). In looking at news coverage of protests against the Gulf War, Hackett and Zhao (1994) describe metonymy as “malevolent” when it is used to discredit whole social movements based on the actions of a few individuals (p. 513). In his column for the Province, Thompson (2003) substitutes Xyolhemeylh for BC’s entire network of 23 Aboriginal agencies, concluding that is “impossible not to be concerned about the 4,500 Aboriginal foster children awaiting transfer to the care of
native protection agencies if the history of one of those agencies is a harbinger of what they may face” (p. A5).

The subheading of another Province article consists of an unattributed quotation denigrating traditional Aboriginal culture, “‘Stupid native healing circle’ doesn’t wash after plea bargain” (Fournier, 2003, p. A3). Several paragraphs into this story, readers learn that Chassidy’s grieving grandfather uttered this phrase. Placing this phrase in such a prominent position in the story, before outlining the context in which it was uttered (and by whom), may predispose readers to draw cynical conclusions about the legitimacy and fairness of healing circles, especially in light of the preceding headline suggesting that the perpetrator is about to “duck jail” (p. A3). Furthermore, foregrounding this derogatory statement reinforces the stereotype that Aboriginal cultural practices are generally inferior to mainstream ones.

In conclusion, reportage on the developments in this case nearly one year after the child’s death differs in significant ways from the breaking news stories. The inclusion of Stó:lō voices in news stories is in itself a significant departure from initial coverage. The two Stó:lō contributors furnish a fuller context in which child welfare issues can be viewed. They introduce structural factors, such as the impact of colonialism, the Indian Act, and limitations imposed on Aboriginal child welfare authorities by legislated delegation agreements—all factors that were left out of earlier coverage.

Press treatment of Aboriginal and provincial authorities compared
Tragedies involving Aboriginal children under the care of Aboriginal agencies are not afforded comparable treatment in news reports to those cases involving Aboriginal children under the care of provincial child welfare authorities. In January 2001, Savannah Hall died in a non-Aboriginal Prince George foster home while under the care of the then Ministry of Children and Families. In the weeks following her death, this story garnered far less media attention than did the X yolhemeylh case, with only three articles appearing in the Vancouver Sun and Province. However, on October 15, 2005, over four years after the child’s death, the story was reinvigorated when the Vancouver Sun reported that the newspaper had “uncovered” a coroner’s review of the case that had some disturbing conclusions (Rud, p. A14). Over a two month period, eighteen news items had this case as their primary focus (see Figure 4). The intensity of media scrutiny of this case may be explained, in part, by the fact that this story assumed greater dimensions than that of the “routine” Aboriginal tragedy. Reportage of this case linked it to a much larger story that was unfolding in the province: a full-blown political scandal, in which the provincial government was accused of inadequately investigating the deaths of hundreds of children.

In general, coverage had a somewhat different focus than did the later reportage of the X yolhemeylh case. For one thing, it moved beyond blaming individuals and touched on systemic problems and structural issues, such as the availability of resources and the working conditions of child protection workers. While the coverage raises a number of questions about the actions of the child’s foster mother, that caregiver is given space not only to defend her actions, but also to accuse the ministry and the government of not fulfilling their responsibilities. For example, on October 17, 2005, the Vancouver Sun reported the foster mother’s allegation that “all action by the
government and the Coroners Service to lay blame against her for Savannah’s death is just ‘the ministry covering its ass’” (Culbert & Cernetig, p. A1). In a number of news stories, the tragedy is constructed as one that was at least partially caused by politically motivated decisions on the part of the BC government. One Vancouver Sun article reports that the ruling Liberal Party sacrificed the care of children in the name of cutting costs:

Savannah died in the final months of the NDP government, but the Liberals—who have made budget cuts to the child welfare system—were in power throughout most of the investigations into her death. The Liberals have been fighting accusations that the system is in turmoil, after several high-profile deaths of children who were either in care or had contact with government workers (Kines, 2005, p. A3).

The notion that the child welfare system is in chaos and/or dysfunctional is one that appears in a number of Province news texts. One front page news story noted that BC’s child welfare system has been “rocked” by several “tragic stories of child deaths” in recent years (“Bruised, bloodied and bound,” 2005, p. A1); another suggested that the government did not offer the foster parents “the tools to properly care for Savannah” (“Coroners to re-examine deaths of 2 foster kids,” Culbert & Cernetig, 2005, p. A1);
while an editorial described the provincial ministry as being in a state of “organizational chaos” (“Overlapping inquiries into toddlers’ deaths more evidence of chaos,” November 10, 2005, p. A18).

While five of 14 news stories mention the child’s Aboriginal ancestry, none question the appropriateness of a non-Aboriginal child welfare authority caring for Aboriginal children. This contrasts sharply with coverage of the Xyolhemeylh case, where a single tragic event is constructed as casting into doubt the competency of an entire agency and, in one column, the capacity of the entire network of Aboriginal agencies to care for “their own.”

On the other hand, news coverage of this case incorporates nuanced discussions about topics not included in the discourse on of the Xyolhemeylh case, including high caseloads and the connection between poverty and neglect. In “A terrible toll of little lives cut short,” a Vancouver Sun columnist contends that the high poverty rates affecting Aboriginal communities partially account for Aboriginal overrepresentation in the child welfare system (Bramham, 2005, p. A1). The high rates of neglect affecting some Aboriginal communities may have less to do with their Aboriginality than with the fact that they are more likely to be living in economically strained circumstances than are other Canadians. The inclusion of a discourse about the connections between poverty and child welfare would have the potential to generate additional interpretative choices for readers.

News coverage of critical incidents involving non-Aboriginal authorities offers more openings for structural analysis of broader issues affecting the provision of child welfare services—such as caseloads, service funding and poverty—than does reportage of tragedies involving Aboriginal agencies. Reports about the Aboriginal agency are grounded in stereotypes and cultural scripts about Aboriginal people and their presumed inability to take care of themselves.

Why “the news” matters for Aboriginal people

News media play a key role in shaping public perception about Aboriginal people, especially for those Canadians who have little direct contact with them. Representations of Aboriginal people place them outside the mainstream vision of “our” community. From an historical perspective, Benedict Anderson has written about the pivotal role played by “print capitalism” in forging the “imagined community” of the nation-state (Gillespie, 2000, p. 166). In Canada, Aboriginal people are included in this imagined community as idealized, romantic figures or historical artifacts, while being excluded from the standard of living enjoyed by other Canadians. This economic disparity is well documented. In 2007, the Canadian Council for Social Development estimated that 42.8% of Aboriginal people were living in poverty compared to 19% of other Canadians. The outlook for Aboriginal children is even bleaker. The National Children’s Alliance reported that in 2006 on-reserve children had a quality of life that ranked 78th on the UN’s Human Development Index, comparable to the ranking for Peru and Brazil. The existence of developing world living conditions for Aboriginal people in one of the richest countries in the world is a paradox noted in a recent Globe and Mail op-ed. With tongue planted firmly in cheek, Blatchford (2008)
suggested that coverage of Aboriginal issues be treated as a “foreign bureau, complete with foreign correspondent and travel budget” (p. A2).

This imbalance in social and economic capital is as prevalent today as it was a century ago. Yet polling has shown that a plurality of Canadians believe that Aboriginal communities are much better off than they actually are:

An Insight Canada poll found that nearly half of Canadians believed that the standard of living on reserves was as good as or better than the Canadian average. In the same poll, 83% of Canadians interviewed believed that conditions for Aboriginal people were either improving or staying the same. (Beavon & Cooke, 2003, p. 202).

The news media are implicated in this disconnect between public opinion and the actual situation of Aboriginal people. Much news reporting on Aboriginal people tends to focus either on the tragic consequences of the extreme social conditions they experience or on the vast resources “squandered” on or by them: lucrative treaty settlements, expensive residential school healing programs, as well as large sums of government money “handed” to Indian reserves, Aboriginal child welfare agencies and other Aboriginal organizations. Based on these two streams of reportage, some Canadians may reach the conclusion that by giving Aboriginal people large sums of money, the government consigns them to dependency, thus contributing to the extreme social problems highlighted in the press. In fact, this is one theme of a reactionary critique of state policy towards Aboriginal people as embodied by Flanagan’s (2000) First Nations, Second Thoughts and, more recently, Widdowson and Howard’s (2008) Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry.

News coverage of Aboriginal issues has real consequences for Aboriginal self-determination. A variety of studies have established that, within the Canadian news media, truth about Aboriginal matters is framed in ways that constrain the aspirations of Aboriginal people while bolstering the status quo (Furniss, 2001; Lambertus, 2004; Henry & Tator, 2002). Popular misperceptions about Aboriginal people and issues may limit the receptivity of Canadians to “costly” initiatives designed to improve the lives and autonomy of Aboriginal people, including the devolution of control over child welfare from provincial authorities to Aboriginal people.

**Covering Aboriginal child welfare: Playing the blame game**

The Xyolhemeylh case became a major media event, garnering coverage at the local and provincial levels, and even on the national stage. During the two weeks after the discovery of the child’s body, 14 news items on the topic were published in the two Vancouver daily newspapers and two articles appeared in The National Post. In addition, seven articles appeared in three Fraser Valley community newspapers in the four weeks of coverage under analysis. The intensity of this reportage needs to be seen in the context of the scale of risk that vulnerable children face in this country:—every year, hundreds of children under the care of, or receiving services from, provincial child welfare authorities die and many more are injured. In BC alone, over a six and a half year period, 243 children under the care of or receiving services from the provincial children’s ministry died from a variety of causes, including accident, suicide, and
homicide (Hughes, 2006). Yet only select cases attract sustained attention from news media.

Sadly, tragedies affecting Aboriginal people are stock in trade at mainstream media outlets. “Bad news sells,” and bad news is often the only news about Aboriginal people the Canadian public ever receives. As Aboriginal adversity has become commodified in the press, reporters increasingly rely on stereotypes and entrenched cultural scripts, availing themselves of a ready-made structure that will support their stories. By invoking stereotypes and scripts, journalists avail themselves of a ready-made structure that will support their stories.

Aboriginal people bear the harmful consequences of this type of reporting. While reporters might rely on it as a type of a journalistic “shorthand” that allows for easy story framing, stereotyping glosses over critical nuances and conflates diverse individuals, communities, and cultures. This leads to one-dimensional, de-contextualized coverage of important issues, which reinforces the communication gap between Canada and its third solitude. The RCAP (1996) concluded that many persistent “myths and misperceptions” of non-Aboriginal people are “perpetuated by no communication, poor communication, or one-sided communication” (p. 5).

In the X yolhem elh case, initial news coverage was built on a stereotype—Aboriginal people as victim—that resonates for many Canadians. Within a few days, this stereotype became double-edged—Aboriginal people were seen as both victims and victimizers. Many of the Aboriginal actors in these news stories were depicted as if they were in one of two distinct “camps”: those who had little or no agency and were taken advantage of, or those who had agency but, acted in ways that harmed others. Blame was quickly assigned to individual workers and managers. Within 48 hours of the first story on the child’s death, the Province launched its own investigation into the agency, relying heavily on the views of political adversaries of the leadership of the agency and the Stó:lo Nation. Yet, in their coverage of this case, the Province provided no background information about, or even made reference to, the deep political schism within the Nation. Ultimately, this coverage cast into doubt the competency of X yolhemelh as well as BC’s entire network of Aboriginal child welfare agencies.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the interpretive contexts available to readers of news coverage of this case in 2002. It is likely that a large proportion of the BC public would have had limited knowledge of the history of, or rationale for, the devolution of child welfare responsibilities from provincial governments to Aboriginal people. As well, readers may have had little insight into the precarious nature of providing child welfare services to people living in poverty. The challenges facing Aboriginal agencies are further complicated by the fact that funding levels for “services for Aboriginal children on and off reserve are almost exclusively lower than those provided to non-Aboriginal children” (National Children’s Alliance, 2006).

Furthermore, it is doubtful that the average British Columbian would have had any prior knowledge about the political dispute within the Stó:lo Nation. Given the de-contextualized coverage of this story, some readers may have opted for a simple, common sense conclusion: Aboriginal people are unready to assume responsibility for child welfare. Perhaps the unwritten corollary to this is that they are certainly not ready for self-government.
Aboriginal people’s lack of readiness for self-government is a theme of contemporary discourse. Prescriptions offered in the news often presume a return to some variation of the status quo in Aboriginal child welfare, one that prevailed from the passage of the Indian Act in 1876 until the 1980s, when provincial governments began devolving responsibility for child welfare.

**Transforming the representation of Aboriginal people in mainstream media**

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the degree to which news coverage has been unyoked from Canada’s colonial past. Historically, the state has exercised control over Aboriginal children in order to carry out policies of assimilation such as the residential school system and the Sixties Scoop. Control over the design and delivery of child welfare services is one of the primary means by which First Nations can ensure their political, cultural, and linguistic survival. Yet the press rarely reports on Aboriginal initiatives in light of the history of the state’s “assimilationalist” child welfare practices. In news reports about devolving responsibility for Aboriginal child welfare, the impacts of the residential school system on Aboriginal people and communities are ignored or minimized, while the dismal outcomes for Aboriginal children under the care of provincial authorities are rarely mentioned. The result is news coverage that is anecdotal, decontextualized, and dismissive of Aboriginal concerns.

Over the years, media watchdogs and social justice advocates have made numerous suggestions for working within the system to improve the representation of Aboriginal people and other groups. For instance, former AFN Grand Chief Phil Fontaine (1998) has advocated that press councils act to deter “unfair” representations of Aboriginal people rather than simply investigate selected complaints from private citizens. Also, curricula in journalism schools could be adjusted so that students learn about the context of Aboriginal issues and the history of their representation in the news. Finally, journalism graduates could be held accountable for their reporting on Aboriginal issues by their profession. In spite of these well-intentioned recommendations, the representation of Aboriginal people and issues in the news is still problematic. At best, Aboriginal curricula in journalism schools, stronger codes of ethics, and more proactive press councils may contribute to a gradual shift in journalistic culture.

A more effective way to improve the representation of Aboriginal people in the news is to include them in news production as reporters, op-ed writers, and editors. This study found that while later coverage of the Xyolhemeylh case had similar characteristics to breaking news—such as a focus on blaming Aboriginal people and discrediting devolution—the inclusion of op-eds written by Aboriginal people in later coverage created opportunities for news audiences to situate the death of this child in broader contexts. In this case, these opinion pieces were written by prominent Aboriginal people whose communities were directly impacted by the shift in control of child welfare services. They introduced structural factors absent from initial discourse about Aboriginal child welfare, such as the impact of colonialism, the Indian Act, and legislative limitations imposed on Aboriginal child welfare authorities.

Significant Aboriginal participation in news production may lead to some improvement in reportage, but it is doubtful that this in itself has the potential to
transform the representation of Aboriginal people in the news. Even with increased Aboriginal involvement in news production (and Canada’s press is a long way from achieving that), Aboriginal people may still be represented as outsiders and “rendered invisible on many levels” (Roth, 2005, p. 14). After all, Aboriginal media workers would still be working in organizations where ownership factors and commercial imperatives have a decisive impact on how and which issues are covered. Even the Stó:lō voices included in coverage of the Xyolhemeylh case operated on the margins of discourse in that, as op-ed writers, they were reacting to events after the fact and not involved in the process of framing breaking news. Furthermore, as self-identified Aboriginal opinion writers and members of the First Nation where the story events took place, readers may have concluded that their views were partisan and therefore not objective or balanced.

A genuine transformation of how Aboriginal people and issues are represented will occur when Aboriginal people themselves gain control over news selection and production processes. Aboriginal communications researcher Roth (2005) points out that mainstream media treat Aboriginal people as either historical objects or cultural subjects. On the other hand, she argues that when Aboriginal people have control over media organizations, as in broadcasting (APTN), they consciously use media as tools of emancipation. APTN’s motto, “Sharing our stories with all Canadians” suggests that the network is consciously trying to extend its influence well beyond Aboriginal Canada. Indigenous scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred (2005) believes that the most effective way to influence the public is by projecting “voices, images and ideas” through “indigenous media” (p. 205). When Aboriginal-controlled media outlets are able to reach significant non-Aboriginal audiences, Aboriginal people will have a voice in both agenda-setting and framing of issues that matter most to them. As a result, they will have the opportunity to engage the Canadian public in a debate about vital Aboriginal self-governance initiatives. Then, and only then, will discourse about Aboriginal issues become a conversation instead of a soliloquy.

Notes
1. In fact, the child’s first name was misspelled in early reports. She was referred to as “Chastity” in news stories published in the Province and the Vancouver Sun on September 26th and in a story appearing in the September 27th edition of the Abbotsford Times. An article in the September 27th edition of the Province noted that this discrepancy resulted from the fact that the newspaper had relied on the spelling given by Chassidy’s father.

2. The national newspaper and two major dailies, which are published six times weekly, furnish considerably more coverage than their community newspaper counterparts, which are published only once or twice a week. In order to generate comparable quantities of data, I surveyed four weeks of news coverage from community newspapers, compared to two weeks for the other newspapers.

3. Of the eight articles in the Vancouver Sun, Province, Abbotsford Times, and Chilliwack Times that reference criticisms of Xyolhemeylh by internal opponents of the Stó:lō Nation administration, only two mention the political division in the nation. One Vancouver Sun headline implies that Stó:lō leadership as a whole was advocating a review of the agency: “Child suffers injuries 2 months before death: Stó:lō leaders call for review into native child welfare agency” (Bolan & Kines, 2002, p. A1). Later in the story, the reporter adds a qualifier: “Some Stó:lō Nation leaders said” (p. A1).

4. The term “Sixties Scoop,” first used in a report in 1983 by the Canadian Council on Social Development, refers to the adoption practices of non-Aboriginal child welfare agencies in the 1960s and
1970s. York (1992) reports that, during these two decades, as many as 15,000 Aboriginal children were dispatched to the Homes of white middle-class couples in Canada and the United States, on the assumption that these couples would make better parents than low-income families on Indian reserves and in Métis communities. … [These children] were submerged in another culture, and their native identity soon disappeared. They became a lost generation. Aboriginal communities had virtually no input into the wholesale apprehension of their children by non-Aboriginal social workers acting on behalf of provincial child welfare authorities. Crey (1991) compares the “patronizing” nature of these social workers and agencies to that of Canada’s early missionaries and colonial government officials.

5. While press councils have been described as “toothless,” Russell (2006) points out that they at least offer a “safety valve for complaints” about news reporting and elaborate “useful principles with significant input from laypersons outside the news industry” (p. 231). This would not solve all problems relating to Aboriginal representation in the press; however, it might set a tone where newspapers at least need to be mindful of the Aboriginal presence generally and be capable of responding to egregious news stories to avoid censure by press councils.

6. Journalism schools in other countries have offered these types of courses as electives. For example, Hartley and McKee (2000) point out that the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, offers students the option of taking “Aboriginal People and the Media,” a course designed to help students not only develop a critical consciousness about mass media racism, but also to implement “strategies for intervening in the mass communication field to challenge racism and to promote intercultural understanding and tolerance” (p. 331).

7. Specific standards of practice could be set about how Aboriginal people and issues ought to be covered. However, many journalistic codes, including the Canadian Association of Journalists’ 2002 “Statement of Principles” and ethical guidelines, do not designate race or ethnicity as an area in need of special attention. Russell (2006) notes that a study of over 30 codes used in Canadian newsrooms found a topic that was often missing was “racial stereotypes” (p. 242). On the other hand, the International Journalists’ Federation Code of Ethics encourages journalists to step outside their traditional role of “impartial observer” and actively fight racism (Hartley & McKee, 2000).

8. Currently, Aboriginal newspapers do not offer the same potential as APTN for influencing the framing of Aboriginal issues. Publications such as Windspeaker, Kahtou News, and Raven’s Eye are published only once a month, have very limited circulations and are directed primarily at Aboriginal audiences. The limited frequency of publication of Aboriginal newspapers may be related to the financial woes of the Aboriginal press that were exacerbated in the early 1990s when the federal government eliminated a program designed to subsidize some of their costs. Many of the scaled-down Aboriginal publications that survived these cutbacks are confined to “areas where Aboriginal people are populous enough to form a viable consumer audience that can be sold to advertisers” (Big Canoe & Rupert, 2002, p. 15).

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