

# Shifting the Narrative

Honest and courageous: Six BIPOC journalists talk openly about the lack of diversity in Canadian newsrooms and ensuring that marginalized voices and stories get the space they deserve

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**“In journalism, race has conflicting concepts of proximity, given that white journalists are afforded proximity and expertise to every story and community. Yet journalists from marginalized groups are punished for their proximity to their own communities.”**



Eternity Martis

Imagine being a racialized journalist who has an interest in writing stories about race, and pitching an idea to a room full of people who don't share the same background or lived experience as yourself. The pitch is rejected. You continue to pitch stories you are passionate about but they continue to be shut down. One day, you decide not to pitch story ideas on race anymore because, ultimately, you know they won't be published.

This is a reality for BIPOC\* journalists like Pacinthe Mattar who has experienced a lack of diversity in the Canadian media industry. The former producer for nine years at CBC compared Canadian newsrooms to a triangle. At the bottom, the widest part of the shape, are BIPOC journalists in junior, contract or internship reporting positions. At the highest peak of the triangle are the white senior staff or owners of the publication to whom the BIPOC journalists must report. "You may have diverse senior producers, senior hosts, executive producers but even when you get into upper management and the people who make the big decisions, it just disappears," said Mattar.

Mattar has seen this scenario unfold many times: a journalist will pitch their story and the room is silent until someone who either hates or loves the idea speaks. Then the room fills with conversation that echoes that one person's sentiment. "If enough people stay quiet, then the loudest person, most often the most powerful person in the room, can single-handedly kill or greenlight the story," said Mattar.

In the spring and summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and hundreds of Black lives at the hands of police ignited a racial reckoning and sparked conversations across all industries. Many brave BIPOC journalists spoke out against their publications and co-workers, revealing for the first time the racist undertones and microaggressions that have long existed in U.S.-and Canadian-newsrooms. In the months since last year's protests, I found myself struggling with questions about what this means for me, a young journalist of Indo-Caribbean heritage, as I prepare to leave my post-secondary education and find a job in the journalism industry. Hearing BIPOC journalists share their own experiences about the racial encounters they face on a daily basis and the mental and emotional toll it takes, makes me worry for myself and a generation of young journalists like me. But apprehension also made me curious. Being a journalist, I read widely and sought out answers to, and validation for, the

### **BIPOC\* (buy-pock)**

**(noun) An acronym which stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.**

Here's the position of 2021 Emerge editors: There is no perfect word to use when describing a group of people who aren't white and words like 'diverse' and 'minority' are far too broad and generalized. If you are referring to a specific group or race of people, you should use precise and specific language to identify that community. BIPOC, although a wordy acronym, is fairly effective because it specifically highlights Black and Indigenous people who historically have been affected by white supremacy and colonization. People of colour refers to non-white people who also face racism and discrimination. In this story and publication, we made a consistent effort to ensure that we aren't lazy and use the term too liberally; if there is a more accurate word, we use that instead.

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 Farah Nasser



questions looming in my head. My quest included listening to six BIPOC journalists who spoke at three different panel discussions throughout the pandemic. Honest, courageous and vulnerable, each journalist shared their experiences about being racialized people in the newsroom and the absence of diversity in Canadian media. This article is Emerge 2021's effort to accurately synthesize and curate their stories for the benefit of aspiring journalists who share my seeking answers to the same questions.

Early in her journalism career, Eternity Martis, an award-winning Toronto-based journalist, would pitch stories on issues that affected Black communities, but her editors didn't trust she would maintain the same credibility when reporting on a story about her own community as a white journalist. On the first day of her internship, Martis was told reporting on issues like anti-Black racism, as well as gender and social issues was a job for activists, not journalists. Reporting on race was considered a conflict of interest. "In journalism, race has conflicting concepts of proximity, given that white journalists are afforded proximity and expertise to every story and community," said Martis. "Yet journalists from marginalized groups are punished for their proximity to their own communities."

The experiences of racialized journalists also reveal that they are not treated with the same respect in the newsroom as their white colleagues. Karyn Pugliese, a journalism professor at Ryerson University and former news director at Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, expressed she had been called a "difficult, Indigenous woman" all her life simply because she fought for a story like any other reporter would do. She said there is a bias that exists when journalists of colour are labelled as 'difficult' when they push for their stories.

These narratives, Pugliese said, are not simply a race issue but a human rights issue and should be seen as being in the interest of all Canadians. Instead, the quest for media narratives that reflect the country's population is framed through the lens of only being a 'race issue.' She recalls a study done by Kristen Gilchrist that compared the Canadian press coverage of missing or murdered Indigenous and white women.

"White women would get headlines like, 'Alice, we miss you' and a full biography with a large picture. The Native women would have, 'Native girl missing - described as nice' no picture and below the fold," said Pugliese. All stories, she said, should be covered

# The Way Forward

How to take steps toward more representational media narratives

## Be proactive and not reactive

Don't wait for the next hate crime to happen to take action or start the conversation. Make a commitment to take a deeper look at what's beyond the surface. It's not enough to get a basic comment from two sides and publish.

## Build relationships

Connect and engage with community leaders and organizers before you think of pitching a story. Familiarize them with the intention of your reporting. Journalists should read and consume work from other writers to gain knowledge about the histories and traumas of communities with which they want to work.

## Shift the focus

Stop asking marginalized journalists to be sure that their experiences don't affect the story. Instead, ask white journalists about how they plan to ensure they do not contribute to further harm or bias.



Eternity Martis

## Disrupt the power dynamics

If the room is filled with crickets after a journalist completes their pitch, just ask them a question about it: 'What's interesting to you about this?' This gives the journalist more space to elaborate and expand their thinking instead of completely shutting down the idea.

## Pitch stories about excellence

The best way to change the narrative about racialized communities is to share their success stories. If pitches get rejected, a reporter should ask their editors, 'why?' Journalists must justify why they want to do a story. Editors should also justify why they chose to pass on it.

## Shop the pitch around

If one publication does not accept a story idea, take it to others. Look for people to support the story or contribute to it. Find momentum wherever you can.

## Take a step back to prevent burnout

Don't feel like you have to take on everything yourself. Protect your energy and protect your peace, only pursue the projects with which you feel comfortable.



Pacinte Mattar

with the same depth and attention to detail regardless of the race or gender of the individuals involved.

The role of a journalist is to tell the story in an unbiased and objective manner, but human beings cannot be truly objective in their thinking. Pugliese said what is traditionally deemed as 'objective' in reporting often has a white, male, baby boomer bias to it because it reflects the lived experiences of the people making story decisions. If there were racialized journalists in those senior positions, what is viewed as objective would be different.

Traditional objective reporting requires the journalist to report both sides of the story in a fair and fact-driven, unbiased manner. Initially, it sounds like balanced reporting, but if journalists gave both sides to every story, it could be troublesome. Would a journalist be required to publish the perspective of a mass shooter who murdered multiple people, in order to tell both sides of the story? "Objectivity means we cannot even voice an opinion on the cruelest, most objective forms of oppression and harm, like the terrorism and hate inflicted on eight Asian Americans in Atlanta," said Martis. "If this logic is objectivity, we are essentially bystanders in a hate and injustice filled world watching and able to use our skills to step in, but choosing not to."

Martis said rethinking and redefining objectivity is the way forward. It means understanding what social justice is, instead of deciding there is no place for it in journalism.

Advocating for stories that reporters believe need to be told can be a difficult path to follow. It's natural for journalists to become passionate when fighting for pitches that others don't see value in pursuing. Tamika Forrester, a senior producer at CBC News, said when she would raise her voice, she was typecast as "the angry Black woman" and journalists around her felt threatened. "It plays on your psyche in a sense that you always have to be toning down your voice

just a little bit. You always have to make sure you are a bit more calm than your colleagues," Forrester said. "It's as if your passion isn't exactly welcomed."

Having a BIPOC journalist in a predominately white newsroom doesn't ensure the publication will publish the stories that reflect their lived experiences, said Global News anchor Farah Nasser. "It's a seat at the table but it feels like a folding chair," she said. "It's hard to voice your opinion when you are surrounded by people who have different life experiences or perception from you."

That's why allies really need to step forward and report on racialized communities, said Nasser. Journalists who aren't BIPOC need to understand the trauma, experiences and historical perspectives of racialized communities to approach and report on their stories in a fair way. BIPOC journalists are

tired of carrying the weight and responsibility for reporting on their communities. "It's exhausting, when you're always the one that everyone goes to, it takes a load," said Nasser. "It's really, really tiring, especially when something happens that affects you."

Forrester recalled the day George Floyd was killed. She was asked to write a story about what happened and found herself at a loss. "After viewing that video, I can't find the words to tell you the state that I was in," she said. Racialized journalists should not be the only journalists reporting on breaking news that affects their own communities.



Photo: Corey Misquita

Eternity Martis



Photo: Taiwo Bah

Pacinte Mattar

Racialized reporters often find themselves in the position of playing double duty between their news organizations who want a story, while also building trust with communities who have been mistreated by the media in the past. This places immense pressure on BIPOC journalists to deliver the story. Kyle Edwards, managing editor of Native News Online, is no stranger to this. “When I write a story, whether it’s about Black people, Indigenous people or another BIPOC community, I’m writing for that community and I want to do justice by them with the story,” Edwards said.

Doing right by these communities means not only writing about what’s wrong in the community, but also what’s right. Stories about racialized groups are usually sad or filled with tragedy, Edwards said. This is why people may tune out or engage less with stories about marginalized communities because the content is often depressing, negative or tragic. But there are uplifting narratives that should be shared as well. Before becoming the first-ever managing editor of Native News Online, Edwards was a staff writer at Maclean’s. During this time, he recalled wanting to pitch happy, feel-good stories about Indigenous communities to shift the narrative. “In my opinion, [those stories] are very newsworthy but a lot of my editors didn’t feel the same way,” Edwards said.

Newsrooms face pressure to write stories that will receive the highest number of clicks, hits or shares. It becomes a dangerous cycle when journalists are tailoring their stories to get clicks, or it’s decided that stories on Indigenous and Black issues don’t perform well in terms of engagement, so they stop getting coverage.

There will be stories that will not receive as many clicks or views, but it is still important to tell them. A story’s success shouldn’t be measured by the number of page views, Pugliese said: People must “eat their broccoli” when it comes to reading or watching stories with which they don’t particularly enjoy or agree.

The problem, Nasser said, is that non-BIPOC journalists are afraid to cover stories about racialized communities because they don’t want to get flagged for using the wrong language or get called out on Twitter. Forrester said there’s a way to resolve this problem. Newsrooms need to be kinder spaces. Journalists need to be plugged into what their BIPOC colleagues are facing when something tragic happens. It’s important to think about how it affects them and be open to give the time or space needed to deal with their feelings.

When reporting on a community of which people are not a part, journalists should approach the community with a genuine intention, Forrester said. “If they see how genuine you are about hearing more about their stories and getting their perspectives out there, they will feel more comfortable to give you the information you need and they don’t feel like you are coming in with a fakeness,” she said.

Canada has a distinct lack of research when it comes to looking at diversity in newsrooms across the country. As long as BIPOC journalists and their allies continue to fight, this will soon change. As of 2020, these glaring issues have been brought into the mainstream spotlight and strides are being made to rectify the lack of polling data on Canadian BIPOC journalists. While change

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**Tamika Forrester**

is heading in the right direction, there remains a great deal that individuals can do. “We have to find a way to educate our newsrooms in covering these stories better and really articulate why these stories are important,” said Nasser.

But to be effective, change of this magnitude needs to be driven by more than the hopes and experiences of rank-and-file BIPOC journalists, however articulate. For narratives outside the white-dominated media mainstream to be given due consideration—let alone flourish—newsroom leaders must also embrace change. “It’s such a simple thing but it comes down to the [news] leadership,” said Nasser. “Everyone doesn’t see that other perspective and I think that perspective is so key right now.”

#### Voices:

Pacinte Mattar and Kyle Edwards spoke at a panel, *Racialized in the Newsroom: A discussion on the experience of BIPOC journalists*, hosted by Carleton University’s Association for Equity and Inclusion in Journalism (AEIJ) on February 25, 2021.

Farah Nasser, Tamika Forrester, and Karyn Pugliese spoke at a panel, *Journalistic Objectivity, Inclusion and BIPOC journalists*, hosted by The Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) on February 3, 2021.

Eternity Martis spoke at a panel, *Rethinking Objectivity: The Role of Journalism in A Social Justice Era*, hosted by The University of British Columbia’s Journalism School on March 18, 2021.

