**POR Number: 063-16**

**Contract Number: 82082-170182-001-CY**

**Contract Award Date: 2016-10-28**

**Date of Submission: 2017-03-30**

**EXECUTIVE REPORT**

**Cultural Diversity in Canadian Media**

*Prepared for:*

Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission

March 2017

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

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# Executive Summary

Phoenix SPI conducted qualitative research for the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to explore the issue of cultural diversity in Canadian media. A set of six focus groups was conducted between January 16th and 21st, 2017, with one group conducted in each of the following locations: Toronto, Ottawa (French), Montréal, Halifax, Vancouver, and Québec City (French). Participants were Canadians 18 years of age and older who watch programming on Canadian networks. Groups included representatives of visible ethno-cultural minorities, Indigenous peoples, women, people with disabilities, representatives of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) community and adult members of the Canadian public. Turnout was as expected according to industry norms[[1]](#footnote-2), with between 7-9 participants taking part in each group.

**This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants’ views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of members of the general public or members of the targeted audience segments.**

**Perceptions about overall representation and portrayal of segments of Canadian society**

There was a widespread impression that, on the whole, the representation and portrayal of members of segments of Canadian society in Canadian broadcasting has generally improved over the past decade or so. That being said, there was an equally widespread impression that there is still room for improvement, in particular, for people with disabilities and Indigenous peoples. Compared to visible ethno-cultural minorities, women, and members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities and Indigenous peoples were viewed as faring poorly when it comes to the number of times they appear in television programming and the types of characters and roles they play. This was evident when participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “*Canadian television is becoming a mirror in which all Canadians can see themselves*.”

Participants were more likely to disagree than agree with this statement. Just over half expressed disagreement with it compared to just over one-quarter who agreed with it. Expressions of agreement and disagreement were much more likely to be moderate than strong. In two cities, Halifax and Quebec City, a majority of participants disagreed with the statement while only in Vancouver did a majority agree with it. Participants in Ottawa and Montreal were almost equally divided between those agreeing and those disagreeing, while participants in Toronto were most likely to express mixed views, with equal numbers agreeing, disagreeing, and neither agreeing or disagreeing.

**Perceptions by segment of Canadian society and type of show**

Overall perceptions regarding cultural diversity in Canadian media, whether positive, negative, or neutral, tended to be anchored in perceptions regarding the specific groups in question (i.e., visible ethno-cultural minorities, Indigenous peoples, members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, and women). And when it came to perceptions regarding these groups a definite pattern revealed itself. On the whole, women were seen to be doing best both in terms of representation and portrayal, followed by members of visible ethno-cultural communities and members of the LGBTQ community. By contrast, people with disabilities and Indigenous peoples were routinely identified as doing poorly, especially in terms of representation. Indigenous peoples were also routinely identified as faring poorly in terms of portrayal.

There was also a relatively widespread impression that certain types of shows tend to do a better job depicting the diversity of Canadian society in general. Types of shows most often identified as doing a good job or a better job in this regard included dramas and comedies, sports, documentaries, and news and current affairs shows.

Below are summary assessments for each group, with a focus on the most commonly or frequently received feedback from participants:

* *Women*: On the whole, the perception is that women tend to be well represented and adequately portrayed. It was routinely observed that women are not only present as characters, but that they often play lead roles.
  + Representation: Underscoring positive impressions about representation is the fact that many participants were surprised to learn that, according to a study commissioned by the CRTC[[2]](#footnote-3), the representation of women still lags somewhat behind their proportion of the total population.
  + Portrayal:Despite a widespread impression that the portrayal of women is generally good (e.g., they are more likely to be portrayed as independent, confident, successful), there was also a sense that portrayal is still ‘stereotypical’ or ‘unrealistic’ at times. The most common criticism in this regard is that women are still sexualized at times or portrayed as men want them to be (e.g., as tall, slim, beautiful, and well dressed). Types of shows most likely to represent women included dramas and comedies, sports, reality TV, and news and current affairs.
* *Visible ethno-cultural minorities*: Assessments of the representation and portrayal of visible ethno-cultural minorities tended to be mixed.
  + Representation: There was a relatively widespread sense that they are more visible on-screen, both as characters on TV and as a result of channels like OMNI TV. At the same time, it was often suggested that, although programming was becoming more diverse, it was not reflecting the diversity of Canadian society.
  + Portrayal: In terms of portrayal, there was also general agreement that, while roles have improved, there is still stereotyping (e.g., Blacks portrayed as criminals, Hispanic and Latino people as religious, Muslims only being shown in traditional dress, people of Middle Eastern descent as terrorists). Types of shows most likely to represent visible ethno-cultural minorities included comedies, sports, game shows, news and current affairs, and children’s programming.
* *LGBTQ community*: There was an overall impression that members of the LGBTQ community were becoming more visible on-screen, with some adding that their representation is not viewed as taboo as it might have been in the past.
  + Representation:The main criticism in terms of representation is that the focus tends to be on members of the gay and lesbian community and less on members of the BTQ community. Underscoring participants’ perceptions that members of this community were becoming more visible is the fact that many participants were surprised to learn that, according to an American study[[3]](#footnote-4), only 32 out of 4,370 speaking characters were LGBTQ.
  + Portrayal: There was also a sense that the portrayal of members of this community tends to be good, though it was also often suggested that the portrayal can be stereotyped in the sense that they are depicted as extravagant or their character traits are exaggerated. Types of shows most likely to represent the LGBTQ community included comedies, reality TV, documentaries, and news and current affairs programming.
* *People with disabilities*: Participants tended to agree that the depiction of people with disabilities is better in terms of portrayal than representation. In other words, there are very few characters or personalities with a disability, but when there are, they tend to be well portrayed.
  + Representation:In terms of representation, some have the impression that the representation of people with disabilities on TV shows tends to be ‘thematic’ or ‘episodic’. In other words, a show will have an episode that includes a person with a disability, but the focus tends to be on how the main character(s) react to this, not on developing or exploring the character of the person with a disability. Participants also commented on the episodic representation of people with disabilities in sports programming (i.e., apart from coverage of the Paralympics there seems to be little coverage of people with disabilities in sports). Underscoring the impression that members of this community are not very visible is the fact that participants were not surprised to learn that a study commissioned by the CRTC found that people with disabilities are “crucially absent” from programs. Types of shows most likely to represent people with disabilities included dramas and comedies, reality TV, and news and current affairs programming.
  + Portrayal: Participants tended to agree that the depiction of people with disabilities is better in terms of portrayal than representation (i.e. there are very few characters or personalities with a disability, but when there are, they tend to be well portrayed.) In addition, some participants observed that characters with disabilities are often represented by actors who do not actually have that disability (e.g. a character in a wheelchair is represented by an actor who does not have a mobility disability).
* *Indigenous peoples*: Indigenous peoples were consistently described as faring poorly both in terms of representation and in terms of portrayal.
  + Representation: In the words of many participants, Indigenous peoples are virtually invisible on Canadian networks. Underscoring the impression that members of this community are virtually invisible is the fact that no one was surprised to learn that a study commissioned by the CRTC found that the Indigenous community is severely underrepresented. Not surprisingly, participants had difficulty identifying any types of shows that do a good or better job in terms of representing Indigenous peoples. The only example provided with any frequency was not a type of show but a network, APTN.
  + Portrayal: There was a widespread impression that depictions of Indigenous peoples tend to be stereotypical (e.g. depicted as poor, alcoholic, sniffing glue or gas).

**Perceptions of news coverage**

Most participants think there is sufficient coverage of issues of relevance to, or involving, visible ethno-cultural minorities, Indigenous peoples, women, people with disabilities and representatives of the LGBTQ community. However, some participants did identify issues which they think could receive or should receive more attention in the media. These included the following, presented by segment of the population:

* Women:
  + Sexism/sexual harassment in the Canadian military
  + Missing and murdered Indigenous women
  + Abuse of Indigenous women by police
  + Violence against women in general
* Indigenous peoples:
  + Waste disposal on lands of First Nations
  + Opposition to pipelines
  + Living conditions on reserves
  + Suicide rates among Indigenous peoples
  + Missing and murdered Indigenous women
  + Abuse of Indigenous women by police
  + Residential schools issue
* People with disabilities:
  + Soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD
  + Persons seeking assisted suicide
  + The condition of people living with mental illness
* Visible ethno-cultural minorities:
  + Police brutality/racism in police forces
  + Carding of people based on their ethnic origin
  + Condition of Syrian refugees in Canada
* LGBTQ community:
  + Hate crimes motivated by homophobia

Generally-speaking, participants tend to think or assume that the coverage of issues of relevance to, or involving, these segments of the population is balanced or neutral and unbiased. That being said, some provided examples of reporting that they described as biased in one way or another. Examples included the following:

* Reporting of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests in which coverage was perceived to focus on the violence instead of the peaceful protests.
* Coverage of conditions on reserves that had an air of ‘blaming the victims’ for their condition.
* Reports of murdered women which include the line: “she was known to be a prostitute”.
* Stories related to police brutality against visible minorities which include the line: “the suspect was known to police”.
* Reports of crimes which include the line “police are searching for a person of colour” (translation).

1. As is standard practice for focus group research, eleven participants were recruited for each group to ensure sufficient attendance. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ensuring Canadians see themselves reflected in the broadcasting system is one of the key objectives of Canada’s *Broadcasting Act*. In order to inform a potential review of the CRTC’s Cultural Diversity Policy, the CRTC commissioned a study to assess the progress made by Canadian broadcasters in reflecting cultural diversity within the Canadian television broadcasting system since the [2004 report](http://www.cab-acr.ca/english/social/diversity/taskforce/report/cdtf_report_jul04.pdf) by the *Task Force for Cultural Diversity on Television*. The March 2016 study, *Review of Cultural Diversity within Canadian Television Programming*, provided recent data on how cultural diversity is or is not reflected on traditional television in six markets in Canada (Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax, Ottawa, Montréal, and Québec City). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. During the focus groups, participants were provided a handout (an infographic) that presented some statistics on the representation and portrayal of cultural diversity in the Canadian and American broadcasting systems. The handout was only meant to stimulate discussion and was not intended to be considered an authorized or complete overview of the current statistics. This was clearly explained to the participants when they were provided the handout. Canadian statistics were drawn from the 2016 study commissioned by the CRTC (cited in footnote 2) and the American statistics were drawn from a September 2016 paper published by the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, *Inequality in 800 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LBGT and Disability from 2007-2015*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)