

6-14-2011

## Diverting an Old Man from Alberta: There is a River Involved, but the Old Man is Not in it (He is Reading His Local Newspaper)

Sara Johansson

*The University of Western Ontario*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Johansson, Sara (2006) "Diverting an Old Man from Alberta: There is a River Involved, but the Old Man is Not in it (He is Reading His Local Newspaper)," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol14/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [kmarsha1@uwo.ca](mailto:kmarsha1@uwo.ca).

---

# Diverting an Old Man from Alberta: There is a River Involved, but the Old Man is Not in it (He is Reading His Local Newspaper)

## Keywords

Alberta, dams, First Nations burial grounds, journalism, newspaper accounts

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

---

**Diverting an Old Man from Alberta:  
There is a River Involved, but the Old  
Man is Not in it (He is Reading His  
Local Newspaper)**

Sara Johansson

It is not possible to get an entire story from one source. This is especially true with the mass media, where stories are organized and selected to fit consumers' purchasing habits. In 1990 a dam was being constructed on the Oldman River west of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. Those immediately effected by the building of the dam were the Peigan First Nation and southern Alberta farmers. With the completion of the dam, Peigan First Nation burial grounds would be flooded. The nearby farmers would benefit from a controlled supply of water for irrigation. A group called the Lone Fighters from the Peigan First Nation responded to the construction by diverting the river from its original course in order to bypass the dam site. On 31 August 1990, five different papers reported on a court injunction that was issued to the Peigan Nation with an order to stop the diversion. The geographical location of the newspapers studied, the target reader audience, and the potential effect of the river diversion on readers all affected the composition of the

newspaper articles regarding this occurrence. With the increased geographical proximity of a newspaper to recent conflicts between the Canadian government and First Nations people, the overall constructions of First Nations people are increasingly negative. This is seen even in reports of minor events that are wholly unrelated to and removed from nearby disagreements. Where the readers of a newspaper are expected to be mostly Aboriginal, First Nations people are framed in a positive light while the government is portrayed negatively. Conversely, newspapers targeting non-Aboriginal Canadians tend to support government acts over those of First Nations people, who are generally portrayed unfavourably. The newspapers published within Alberta, near to the river diversion, depict Aboriginal people disparagingly.

To exemplify the effect of location, readership, and proximity to events on writing choices, five articles will be examined. The first four, printed in the *Calgary Herald*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Vancouver Province* and the *Edmonton Journal*, are all published by CanWest Mediaworks Publications, a subsidiary of CanWest Global Communications Corporation. In Alberta both the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* have many readers in small towns and farming communities. The *Montreal Gazette* is published near Oka, where violent confrontations occurred shortly before the Oldman dam dispute. The readers of *The Province*, on the other hand, were removed from the dispute both emotionally and geographically. The fifth article, from *Windspeaker*, is the property of the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society (AMMSA). *Windspeaker* is included for general comparisons between these large corporate newspapers and a Canada-wide newspaper written from an Aboriginal perspective.

The first clear indication of the "spin" of a newspaper is the headline. Wording and connotation are very important, because "headlines have a particularly strong influence when the item itself is not read" (Hartmann & Husband 2004:272). The *Calgary Herald's* "Injunction Puts Stop to Peigans - For Now" (*Calgary Herald*, 31 August 1990) is not a declaration of certainty. The phrase "Puts Stop to Peigans" may imply deviance from proper behaviour by the entire Peigan Nation instead of the Lone Fighters. However, in this article authors Mate and Geddes continue on to write that the Lone Fighters "don't have the support of Peigan band leaders" (*Calgary Herald*, 31 August 1990). Having only read the headline, a

reader would be left with misinformation. The subsequent "For Now" leaves the question of future actions by the Lone Fighters and/or Peigan Nation unanswered, almost as a looming threat. The *Edmonton Journal* article uses the headline "Lonefighters Might Defy Oldman Injunction" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). To defy is defined as to resist openly and boldly (Butterfield et. al. 2003), and the use of this word suggests an uncooperative spirit that is not in agreement with the established social order. When coupled with the word "might" this defiance becomes indecisive, but remains an implied threat. A similar headline appears in Jim Morris' *Montreal Gazette* article, titled "Peigans Ordered to Halt Diversion" (*Montreal Gazette*, 31 August 1990). Again, the entire Peigan Nation is implicated until further reading is done. The phrase "Ordered" evokes images of childishness or of stepping out of one's designated place. The most neutral headline, "River Diversion Halted By Court" (*The Province*, 31 August 1990) is found in *The Province* based out of Vancouver. Passive construction is used, eliminating the need to identify for whom the court injunction was passed. With this headline the reader is given no evidence of violent or volatile disagreement, or the major players in the story. Perhaps it is a less gripping headline, but it is worth considering that the article appears on page 35 of the paper where most readers would likely not be looking for major stories.

Compare the *Windspeaker* headline "Lone Fighters Divert Oldman" (*Windspeaker*, 31 August 1990) with for example *The Calgary Herald's* "Injunction Puts Stop to Peigans - For Now" (*Calgary Herald*, 31 August 1990) or the *Edmonton Journal's* "Lonefighters Might Defy Oldman Injunction" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). While both the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* focus on inconsistencies and indecision, Red Crow and Wagg's *Windspeaker* headline, intended for Aboriginal readers, focuses on the completed success of the Lone Fighters, and specifies that it is the Lone Fighters group that is responsible for the diversion instead of the entire Peigan Nation.

The positioning of articles within a paper is crucial to readership. Many readers are satisfied with perusing the front page of a newspaper alone, or the front section. The unsensational title of the article in *The Province*, and its location so far from the front of the paper may indicate that First Nations issues are not a selling point for this particular paper, or may be

the result of the physical distance from the issue at hand on the importance of the story to readers. As Grenier points out, "like other business enterprises, newspaper enterprises must focus attention on maintaining and developing (and even creating) markets for their product" (Grenier 2004:331). How much worth is attributed to various articles can, to a degree, be determined by their location in the paper. The Oldman River injunction story is front-page news in the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*. Both are Alberta-based papers with a majority of Albertan readers. In both of these papers the possible effects of the river diversion are mentioned. The *Edmonton Journal* states that:

if the Lonefighters were to succeed in diverting the river, about 3,000 residents of small communities and irrigation farmers will suffer, but the effect wouldn't be immediate because water is stockpiled in reservoirs and crops are ready to be harvested. (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990)

Therefore, even those readers who are not directly involved into the story should be fostering an interest in the outcome. The story is found on the front page of section B in the *Montreal Gazette*, a position that would allow for fairly high readership.

The front page of *Windspeaker* on 31 August 1990 is devoted to a full-page photo of the river diversion, while the second page contains the article. This is the only article that contains a photo. With violence taking place throughout the month of August 1990 between First Nations people and the government at Oka, it is not surprising that this new potential conflict is given such a prominent place in the paper.

An interesting comparison can be made between many of the statements in the different papers. Much of what is written is from the same source. In a study of the media coverage of the Oka Crisis, Warren H. Skea found that "although [two newspapers] published an article that came from the same Canadian Press release article, the resulting article in each newspaper differed markedly." (Skea 1994, 22). This can be illustrated in this study by the fact that many of the papers have quoted their source verbatim. One arena in which these differences can be found is in the various references to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's delivery of the

injunction. In the *Edmonton Journal* we read that the "RCMP served [the Lone Fighters] with a court order" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990), and that this court order was "delivered by about 50 Mounties." (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). Witness Glen North Peigan is quoted as saying, "they just arrived here, handed the court order and left...They were ready for action. You can use your imagination." (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). This version of the "serving" of the court order appears again in the *Montreal Gazette* and *The Province*. In the *Calgary Herald* however, the "50 RCMP officers descended on the Lonefighters' river bank campsite...to peacefully deliver the injunction" (*Calgary Herald*, 31 August 1990). For fifty RCMP officers to "descend" upon a camp only to peacefully deliver the injunction is a striking contrast of lexical terms. One feels that the presence of each of the fifty officers is necessary, despite the peacefulness of the encounter. The RCMP officers are romantically portrayed as strong and their numbers necessary, and yet they are shown to be full of restraint. The choice to include or not to include Glen North Peigan's quote is also telling. Of the CanWest papers, The *Edmonton Journal* and the *Montreal Gazette* quote North Peigan, while the *Calgary Herald* and *The Province* do not. His statement implies that the presence of the RCMP was imposing, and that the relationship between the First Nations people of the Peigan Nation and the RCMP is one of fear.

In *Windspeaker*, "Fifty RCMP officers were reported to have gathered across from the Lone Fighter's camp" with orders to "immediately arrest anyone, who breached the order" (*Windspeaker*, 31 August 1990). The difference between the *Windspeaker* and *Calgary Herald* articles is impressive. The idea of officers "gathering" is less swift and orderly than a descent may infer. The order for the arrest of any noncompliant persons does not seem to match the "peaceful" intimations of the other articles, which are created through the omission of this order in the reports of the event.

In the case of the 31 August 1990 articles, there were printed intimations of guilt on both sides of the conflict. Some papers printed both sides of the issue, while others printed only one. The *Edmonton Journal* and the *Calgary Herald* included statements from both sides of the conflict, but with emphasis on the guilt of the Peigan Nation instead of the government. In the *Montreal Gazette* one reads

an utterance by a Lone Fighters who says, "there was a court injunction against the people at the dam and you don't see any of them in jail" (*Montreal Gazette*, 31 August 1990). Later in the same article we find a quote from Alberta's Attorney-General Ken Rostad stating that "The Lonefighters Society was clearly breaking the law and because of that the RCMP were instructed to go in and serve an injunction order" (*Montreal Gazette*, 31 August 1990). Later, Band Chief Leonard Bastien "liken[s] the damage from the dam to tampering with the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church" (*Montreal Gazette*, 31 August 1990). With all these sources the *Gazette* gives at least some mention of the opinions of the government, the band and the Lone Fighters. There is a good balance of representation and the readers are left with a sense that they have been fairly well informed.

In other papers only one or two of these sources are listed. The *Edmonton Journal* approaches the story in a noticeably different manner. The court injunction against the building of the dam is mentioned, but in the very last statement. This version of the claim may have more legitimacy in the eyes of the public because it is New Democrat Pam Barrett's remark. While Barrett, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, does have good reason to highlight "the hypocrisy of the [Progressive Conservative] Getty government" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990), she is less directly involved in the conflict than the Lone Fighters are. Her statement is a political move, but her remarks have more weight because of her position in government.

Chief Leonard Bastien is also quoted in the *Edmonton Journal* on his view of the flooding of burial grounds, but also as saying things that would implicate the Lone Fighters and absolve the Peigan Nation itself of guilt. For instance, the reader is informed that "the Lonefighters 'insulted' the majority of Peigan elders by disregarding their wishes" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990) when they carried out their plan. There are also references to environmental damages perpetrated by the Lone Fighters, and the need for environment officials to "move in and undo the work the Lonefighters have already completed" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). In the *Calgary Herald* article Attorney-General Rostad's comments are noted near the top. He claims that the "riverbed is Crown-owned and digging in it breaches The Province's Water Resources Act" (*Calgary*

*Herald*, 31 August 1990). At the end of the article a counter opinion is given that challenges Rostad's contention. A British Columbia lawyer is not certain how the riverbed is Crown land, and even alleges that perhaps a quiet expropriation by the province is the source of this land right. Both claims would appear to be uncertain, since they are in contradiction. However, the lawyer's idea does not seem to follow mainstream ideas judging both from its placement in the article and its absence from all other articles. The near non-inclusion of the assertion gives it less weight in the article than that of Rostad. This is an example of how "claims do not emerge in news stories without first being reinterpreted or 'framed'" (Coleman 1996:181). *The Province's* article seems to be brief and factual. However, in its brevity *The Province* makes interesting decisions about what to exclude. There is no mention of Peigan legends, of the questionability of the Crown right to the land, of the previous injunction against the building of the dam, or of the flooding of Peigan lands as a result of the dam. The only mention of a First Nations person is of Milton Born With a Tooth, the leader of the Lone Fighters. He is said to "[remain] defiant, declaring his members would die defending the river diversion" (*The Province*, 31 August 1990). This mention of the militant Lone Fighters, without mention of the wishes of Chief Bastien or context for Crown claims creates an anti-Native spin in an article that at first glance seems neutral.

The *Windspeaker* gives emphasis to the Lone Fighters' lack of guilt instead of focusing on placing guilt elsewhere. To exemplify, the article begins with the "having diverted the Oldman River to its original creek bed" (*Windspeaker*, 31 August 1990), an action that in this linguistic context would not be interpreted as a crime. Any comments towards the government within this article are more likely references to past actions than present wrongs, with one statement referencing Oka and another suggesting that a law may have been fabricated to give the government grounds to put a stop to the actions of the Lone Fighters.

The newspapers are also not equitable in their written treatment of the people effected by the potentially non-functioning dam. The above quoted text from the *Edmonton Journal* notes that "about 3,000 residents of small communities and irrigation farmers will suffer" (*Edmonton Journal*, 31 August 1990). This is identical to the *Montreal Gazette* article. The use of the term "suffer" is interesting, especially

because the *Gazette* and the *Journal* are also the only two papers that mention that the "green valley around the river has been scarred by a deep, wide trench" (*Montreal Gazette*, 31 August 1990). The same theme of the future effects of the dam diversion occurs in most of the papers. In Red Crow and Wagg's article we read that "half the farmers are on [the Lone Fighter's] side" (*Windspeaker*, 31 August 1990), and that "an 1981 agreement with the irrigation district...assures water for about 133,000 acres of land and domestic water for about 900 farm families and the towns of Picture Butte, Barons, Nobleford, Iron Springs and Turin" (*Windspeaker*, 31 August 1990). There is no mention of suffering or even of outrage, or of the possible negative consequences of the actions of the Lone Fighters. At the same time, there is no apparent omission of facts about the purpose and intended use of the dam. In the *Calgary Herald* the reader is informed that "Lethbridge area farmers and seven small communities use the irrigation weir and canal on the Peigan Reserve to draw water from the Oldman" (*Calgary Herald*). *The Province* mentions the purpose of it in passing, stating that the dam "will provide irrigation and drinking water to communities in southern Alberta" (*The Province*, 31 August 1990). In isolation, these claims about the use of the dam seem almost entirely unbiased, and do not seem to position any of the parties involved in terms of their opinions or intentions. However, it is important to remember that not only specific phrases but also the contexts in which they are found are vital to uncovering media spin.

Clearly, the paper that is most in support of the actions of the Lone Fighters is *Windspeaker*. The headline highlights the progress of the group, and the location of the story in the paper is very prominent. Dealings with the RCMP are described as excessive and even unfair. The innocence of the Lone Fighters is emphasized. Finally, there is no mention of the negative effect of the dam diversion project on the farmers in Southern Alberta. There is a decidedly pro-Lone Fighter spin in this article, as is likely concurrent with the majority readership of the paper. This is not the case in the majority of the articles studied here.

Lisa Philips Valentine writes, "We find most likely places where First Nations peoples will be constructed as the enemy are when their interests are perceived to flaunt or impinge on (a) mainstream members' personal property, (b) access to goods and jobs, and (c) legal standards

(both civil and criminal)” (Valentine 1997:407). In all of the CanWest papers Native people are negatively constructed to some degree. The Lone Fighters are seen to illegally impinge on Crown property and on the access of Southern Alberta farmers to irrigation water for their crops.

In the *Calgary Herald* this story receives a lot of attention, being front-page news. The headline is a misrepresentative generalization on the entire Peigan Nation, and has negative connotations concerning the respectability and trustworthiness of the Peigan people. The RCMP are portrayed very positively, even heroically, in their delivery of the injunction - a portrayal that is not echoed in any other paper. Differing opinions are given on the validity of the Crown’s claim to the riverbed land, but the pro-Crown statement is near the start of the article while a differing view is nearly at the very end. There is no mention of the necessary suffering of farmers who would draw water from the dam reservoir for irrigation, but taken into consideration with the rest of the article in mind, the overall representation of First Nations people is negative.

The *Edmonton Journal* article offers perhaps the least favourable sketch of the Peigan nation of all papers studied. Here the Peigan nation is depicted as wavering and recalcitrant in the headline. The article is front-page news and includes comments that would draw general readers into the story, encouraging empathy for the farmers involved. There is a balanced description of the RCMP’s involvement, including a comment by a Lone Fighter about his experience. As in the *Calgary Herald*, pro-government information is given in the top section of the story while the opposite claims are given at the very end. There are also several comments of an environmental nature, pointing blame at the Lone Fighters for their scarring of the earth. The local farmers are depicted as the victims of a capricious and potentially violent group.

Despite its mostly neutral take on the story, the *Vancouver Province* is still biased towards the government. The passively constructed headline and late appearance in the paper are evidence of the lack of reader interest in the story. Mention of the purpose of the dam is brief and factual. Concerning the RCMP the paper seems neutral again, but the choice to leave out the quote of Glen North Peigan’s negative experience with the officers is a choice that leads to an article that favours the government’s interests. Decisions to exclude

information about Crown rights to the land, the wishes of the band chief and Peigan beliefs about the Oldman River and the land surrounding it have similar effects. This article creates identity not by what is directly stated, but through what is left unsaid.

The *Montreal Gazette* begins with another generalization of the issue to the entire Peigan Nation. The story figures in a prominent place in a secondary section of the paper. Glen North Peigan is quoted, giving balance to the representation of the RCMP. Most positively, the viewpoints of three of the major parties involved in the dispute are given, allowing the reader to at least partially see the story from more than one side. However, the article highlights the supposed environmental damage of the dam diversion and the dependence of local farmers on the future irrigation water. A reader could therefore conclude that First Nations people are anti-development and work to hold back non-Native progress.

The *Windspeaker*’s positive illustration of the actions of the Lone Fighters was most likely due to the mostly Aboriginal readership of the paper, as well as its Aboriginal authorship and ownership. The geographical proximity of the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal* to the Oldman River dam and the potential effects of the outcome of the issue on readers and the proximity of the *Montreal Gazette* to Oka created environments in which negative depictions of First Nations people were more likely. The geographical distance between the Vancouver Province and the issue left a mostly neutral although still biased representation.

As Sandra Lambertus, professor of Anthropology at Grant MacEwan College in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada writes, “In the larger picture, it is Native people across Canada who are most likely to experience long-term effects from [these] damaging stereotypes” (Lambertus 2004, 178). One of the most pervading stereotypes in these articles is one that frames First Nations people as violent or potentially so. In each of the CanWest papers, violence is mentioned or hinted at when no violence had occurred as of yet. Similarly, the Natives are often romanticized with mentions of Peigan legend and sacred lands, positioning the Lone Fighters as noble savages, in touch with the earth. Considering the size and scope of the CanWest Mediaworks Publications, far more Canadian people would have read the stories with negative portrayals and false stereotypes of First Nations people than would have read any

with positive connotations or those accounts written by First Nations people themselves.

In conclusion, the geographical location of a publication, the audience of the paper and the possible effect of the story covered on the readers do affect the composition of any newspaper article. The CanWest papers constructed First Nations people negatively through use of stereotypes, mostly negative headlines and the positioning of pro-government information at the top of their articles. The differences between the articles are primarily the result of the variations in the readership of each paper. Where First Nations issues are concerned, newspapers located near to the issue at hand or near to other First Nations that are perceived as threatening to non-Native people are the most negative, perpetuating stereotypes and misunderstandings. The papers create the idea that First Nations people ought to be feared as they both work against non-Native communities and are likely sources of future violence. Where the audience of a paper is removed from both the issue at hand and other threatening situations articles about First Nations people are perhaps less biased against Natives but do not actively work to represent both sides of the conflict. Short articles will give the minimum of facts, and seem to consider Aboriginal viewpoints and beliefs to be "filler" and unnecessary. Articles written from First Nations perspectives support Aboriginal actions and are critical of the government. It would be interesting to research an incident at Oka soon after 31 August 1990 as recorded in the same papers to note if the patterns continue. Unfortunately, the widest group of Canadian readers is exposed to reporting on First Nations people that either confirms or creates existing stereotypes and supports conventional views of Aboriginal people in Canada, as understood and disseminated by non-Aboriginals.

*Edmonton Journal*. 1990. "Lonefighters Might Defy Oldman Injunction." August 31, p.A1.

Garnier, Marc 1994. Native Indians in the English-Canadian Press: The Case of the 'Oka Crisis'. *Media, Culture and Society*. 16:313-36.

Hartmann, Paul and Charles Husband 1971. The Mass Media and Racial Conflict. *Race*. 12:267-82.

Lambertus, Sandra. 2004. *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds: The Media and the Gustafsen Lake Standoff*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mate, Susan and Ashley Geddes. 1990. "Injunction Puts Stop to Peigans - For Now." *The Calgary Herald*, August 31, p. A1.

Morris, Jim. 1990. "Peigans Ordered to Halt Diversion Indians Debating Whether to Obey Alberta Court." *The Montreal Gazette*, August 31, p. B1.

*The Province*. 1990. "River Diversion Halted by Court." August 31, p.35.

Crow, Jackie and Dana Wagg. 1990. "Lone Fighters Divert Oldman." *Windspeaker*, August 31, p.2.

Skea, Warren H. 1994. The Canadian Newspaper Industry's Portrayal of the Oka Crisis. *Native Studies Review* 9(1):15-31.

Valentine, Lisa Philips 1997. "Friends and Foes: Value Hierarchy and Presentation of First Nations Issues in Mainstream Canadian Press." In *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Algonquian Conference*. pp. 403-417. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

### Works Cited

Butterfield, Jeremy et. al. (editors) 2003. *Collins English Dictionary*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers.

Coleman, Cynthia-Lou. 1996. "A War of Words: How News Frames Define Legitimacy in a Native Conflict". In *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*. Bird, (ed.). pp. 181-193. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.