Stanley trial highlights colonialism of Canadian media

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What can the events surrounding Colten Boushie’s death, the trial verdict and its media coverage tell us about the role of journalism and journalists in relation to Indigenous concerns in Canada? All too much.

There is a well-documented history of Canadian newspapers’ complicity with colonialism and state-sponsored violence against Indigenous people from pre-Confederation forward. And despite the last several decades of front-page coverage that includes the uprising in Oka to Idle No More and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, mainstream media are only doing marginally better than they have before.

Why race matters

Instead, Indigenous scholars, activists and community members are largely doing the important work of situating Colten Boushie’s life and death within the colonial context, answering not if race was a factor, but how and why it matters.

For those countering more than a century of journalism in Canada, the work requires looking at news media’s embedded and interwoven relationship with colonialism. In their book, Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers, Carmen Robertson and Mark Cronlund Anderson argue that Canadian media have — since before Confederation —continually reproduced stereotypes in which Indigenous people are found wanting morally, physically, mentally, historically.

This “othering” helps to “promote a nation,” an “imagined community” of Canada, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, in which Indigenous people are seen as on the margins and the brutality of settler colonialism is seen as natural and normal.

Indigenous journalists and public intellectuals do this work on social media, where trolls attack freelancers and not-for-profit media outlets, and the legal and institutional supports afforded to mainstream media are limited or unavailable.

This work entails articulating over and over the impact of white supremacy, colonialism and the indifference of Canadians about Indigenous peoples, and the enduring injustices and structural inequities they experience.

Some of these issues include: Missing and murdered women, youth suicide, poverty, lack of safe drinking water, inter-generational trauma from residential schools, lack of access to high school education in northern communities — a right of all other youth in this country — and the resilience required in the face of these and many other injustices.

With all of the rhetoric around journalism as a public service, it is a wonder that journalists haven’t produced more reporting and analysis that might work towards transforming the systems that continue to be stacked against Indigenous people, including youth like Colten Boushie.