

Thunder Bay: Local news is important for conversations on reconciliation

April 29, 2019 4.27pm EDT

An infusion of resources into local news outlets in Thunder Bay may help communities contend with recent reports of systemic racism against Indigenous communities. Shutterstock

Thunder Bay: Local news is important for conversations on reconciliation

April 29, 2019 4.27pm EDT

The Ontario city of Thunder Bay is in the headlines these days for all the wrong reasons. Canada's highest rates of murder and violent crime. The highest number of hate crimes per capita. Systemic racism embedded in shoddy police investigations. The deaths — many unexplained — of Indigenous students who come to the city for education not available in their remote northern communities.

For years these troubles and the inequitable relationship between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the city festered. Then in the spring of 2011, the Toronto Star began publishing reporter Tanya Talaga's stories about the deaths of seven young Indigenous students over the previous decade.

What had been a local story vaulted into national headlines. Talaga's reporting became the basis for her 2017 award-winning book *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death and Hard Truths in a Northern City*.

Other media organizations weighed in. *The Walrus* chronicled the local newspaper's problematic coverage of Indigenous issues and its defence of a police force subsequently found to be riddled with racist attitudes and practices. *Thunder Bay*, a podcast produced by Canadaland that explores racism and corruption in the city, made *The Atlantic's* list of the 50 best podcasts of 2018. The *Globe* and *Mail* published this feature last month: "Hate and Hope in Thunder Bay: A city grapples with racism against Indigenous people."

The increased scrutiny has led to conversations about entrenched racism and privilege. A *TVO* analysis, for instance, documented the emergence of two conflicting narratives on social media, one touting the city's attributes, the other offering first-hand accounts of hate directed at Indigenous youth.

Author



April Lindgren

Professor of Journalism, Velma Rogers
Research Chair, Ryerson University

As a former journalist and lead investigator for the Local News Research Project at Ryerson University's School of Journalism, I have been tracking the spread of local news poverty, where the essential information needs of citizens aren't being addressed. I grew up in Thunder Bay and the intense media focus on the city has led me to reflect on what journalism in the public interest should look like in a place that is so deeply divided.

City needs vigorous local reporting

The reporting on Thunder Bay by provincial and national news outlets has increased the pressure to acknowledge everyday racism, institutional racism and the challenges of reconciliation. But it's not enough to just document Thunder Bay's warts in stories that make Canadians in the rest of the country shake their heads in dismay.

Research on the role news plays in local democracy suggests that journalism, at its best, should hold power accountable, inform debate, investigate solutions to difficult issues and provide a forum for the exchange of ideas. This involves nitty-gritty reporting that may not make headlines in Vancouver, Toronto or Halifax but will resonate with people in Thunder Bay.

Local news outlets, however, have struggled to rise to the challenge. The city's newspaper is run by a company controlled by David Radler, a man once known as "The Chainsaw" for his ruthless cost-cutting of newspaper budgets.

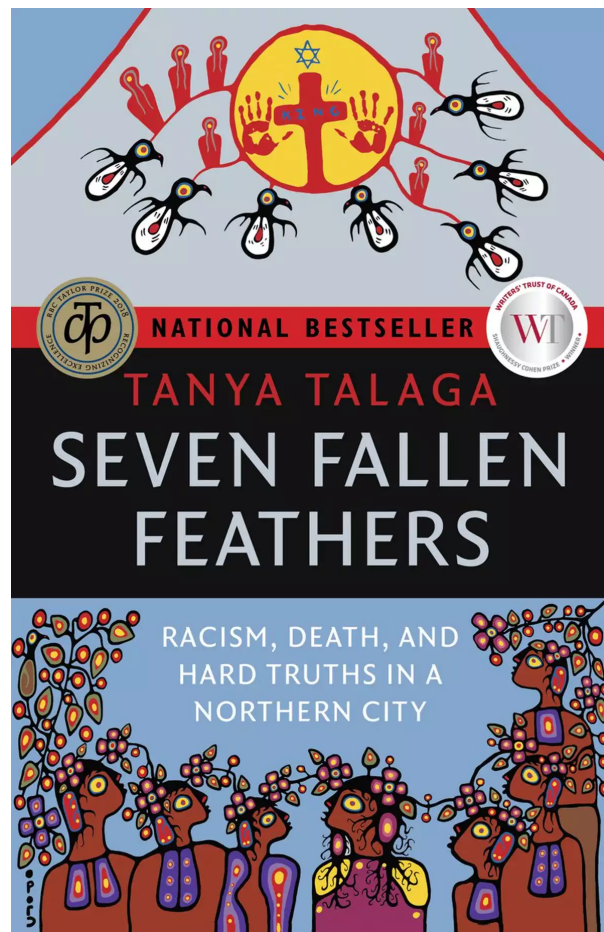
The general manager for Dougall Media, the company that owns the city's two local television stations, said in 2016 that the stations were surviving on life insurance payouts from the deaths of a previous general manager and the company owner.

The local CBC radio station's small newsroom is tasked with covering a city of more 100,000 people while also reporting on the massive territory north of Lake Superior.

APTN, TVO and more recently, the Globe and Mail, have all opened bureaus in Thunder Bay. It is unrealistic, however, to think that news outlets that produce stories that must appeal to provincial and national audiences will "go local" and cover issues primarily of interest to Thunder Bay's relatively small population — despite the desperate need for such reporting.

This is a job for local newsrooms. In the Thunder Bay area, Indigenous peoples account for nearly 13 per cent of the population, the highest proportion of the population of any major Canadian metropolitan area. Journalism at its best and most effective includes diverse voices so as a starting point, the hiring priorities for any local newsroom that doesn't already include Indigenous reporters should be reviewed.

In an ideal world, local media would also hold power accountable by, for instance, relentlessly chasing Ontario Premier Doug Ford to find out if the province will cover any costs associated with the 44 recommendations in the report "Broken Trust" by Ontario's independent police oversight agency. The



Book cover for 'Seven Fallen Feathers.'

report identified significant problems in how the Thunder Bay Police Service conducts sudden death investigations involving Indigenous victims.

Stories about who pays for what will not make national headlines, but they would matter to Thunder Bay taxpayers and residents looking for changes sooner rather than later that make local police more accountable.

Shared facts for informed debates

In an ideal world, where they don't operate on shoestring budgets, local media outlets would play a leading role in exploring solutions. "Broken Trust" said Thunder Bay's police service needs to **implement mandatory Indigenous cultural competency and anti-racism training**. What should these programs look like? What worked elsewhere? What's the cost, what's the benefit and what option might be best for Thunder Bay?

This type of explanatory journalism, which takes time and is more costly than writing a quick summary of a news release, equips citizens, politicians — and in this case police officers — with a common set of facts as a starting point for debate, deliberation and decision-making.

Creating space for conversations

News organizations in Thunder Bay could also be more active as honest brokers in difficult conversations.

To its credit, TVO, Ontario's public broadcaster, organized a **town hall-style discussion in Thunder Bay about five years ago** that focused on racism experienced by Indigenous peoples.

Much has happened since then, however, and local media could be doing more to bring residents together to explore tough issues. Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, has facilitated conversations like this in other places: **town hall meetings** in Toronto have examined both family and **gun violence**. These types of events are admittedly tricky to produce: A level of trust must be established in advance among organizers and participants and that takes time, motivation and resources.

But if the CBC can make town halls happen in Toronto, it can make them happen in Thunder Bay.

The city isn't alone in suffering the consequences of a weakened local news ecosystem. Over the past decade, **275 local news outlets, most of them community newspapers, have closed** in 197 Canadian cities, towns and rural municipalities. Layoffs have **ravaged the reporting capacity** of many other newsrooms.

The recent federal budget included new tax measures designed to counter the spread of local news poverty but there are **questions about the structure and effectiveness of the initiatives** — and they aren't going to reverse the tide.

Lack of media scrutiny, meanwhile, means smouldering issues are not being addressed in many places across Canada. In this sense, Thunder Bay is lucky to be getting so much attention from the country's major news organizations — the coverage has forced political leaders and citizens to **acknowledge the city's problems**.

What Thunder Bay isn't getting is enough local journalism to help solve those problems.

