

Voices and Authority of Native Americans in the News Media

I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment. –[student name]

Introduction

News media acts as a powerful lens for culture. Trends in popular culture can be solidified by the media, while stories highlighted in the news get more attention than they would otherwise. Thus the media acts as a powerful filter to determine which issues are included in the national conversation (Wilkes et al., 2010).

Not everyone in the U.S is represented equally in the news media. Native American tribes are one of the most marginalized groups in the country's media. For instance, Moore and Lanthorn (2017) found that the most common portrayal of Native Americans in the news media is omission—that is, they are almost never considered “newsworthy”. This is in part because Native Americans do not represent a large proportion of national newspapers' readership; thus their concerns are ignored in favor of more dominant audiences (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017). Lack of coverage contributes to the national silence surrounding contemporary Native issues and makes building public support for Native concerns more difficult.

Because Native Americans are so seldom covered in national media, when a story concerning them does break national news, the portrayal of Native groups becomes more important. Much of the coverage of Native Americans consists of stereotypes or lacks context about tribes' history (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017). Even in their own stories, Native perspectives may not be given as much weight as non-Native ones. For instance, Perkins and Starosta (2001) found that in coverage of fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest, many articles included more quotations and official titles for non-Natives than Natives, thus granting more authority to non-

Native perspectives. Native voices are important in national media to ensure that Native Americans are represented in a way they want to be, with the same authority as non-Native people.

For this paper I examined how much of a voice Native Americans had in recent coverage of a Supreme Court decision to uphold a controversial voter ID law in North Dakota. The court voted on October 9, 2018, to allow a law requiring voters to have residential addresses to take effect. Earlier that year, a district court had blocked the law from taking effect in part because it would disproportionately affect tribal members, many of whom only had mailing addresses at post office boxes. Some saw this law as a Republican move to defeat democratic senator Heidi Heitkamp, whose close election in 2012 was attributed in part to Native voters. The decision to uphold the law just a month before midterm elections resulted in an enormous logistical challenge to North Dakota tribes, who had to scramble to provide acceptable IDs so soon before the election.

This event was one of the few recent stories involving Native Americans to make national news. I compared coverage of this story in dominant national newspapers and Native news outlets to see if there was a difference in how strong a voice Native Americans had. To do this I analyzed sourcing in the articles. Given the general lack of coverage of Native issues, I expected national news media to give less voice to Native Americans than Native news outlets. While my findings partially supported this hypothesis, there were variations between articles that complicated the results.

Methods

To find national publications for my analysis, I used the top five newspapers by circulation according to a Pew Research Center study (Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 2011). These sources were credible, relatively neutral publications. I also included the *Bismark Tribune* as a dominant regional paper in North Dakota. After I couldn't find an article in *USA Today* (one of the top five publications), I substituted an article from *NPR*. I began my search for Native news outlets in Daniels (2006), which listed four large Native news sites. When not all of those sources covered the event, I found other Native outlets with a Google search. I also included *High Country News*, which is possibly the only non-Native news outlet in the country with a dedicated section on tribal affairs (Calvert, 2019). One of the outlets I found, *Indianz.com*, had a link to a CNN article about the decision. Since this was presumably a choice of the staff of *Indianz.com*, I still included the site as a Native news outlet even though it did not have original content.

In each publication I searched "North Dakota voter ID law" and used the article published closest to October 9th, the date of the Supreme Court decision. All but one of the outlets, *LA Times*, reported on the Supreme Court decision. (The closest article to that date in the *LA Times* was about a later appeal from the tribes). To analyze the sources in each article I borrowed the five-point model developed in Perkins and Starosta (2001). This model asks five questions that indicate how sources are presented in the article. The questions are:

- 1) Who is/is not quoted?
- 2) Who is/is not given credence by title?
- 3) Where are those cited positions within the news reports?
- 4) Whose ideas are supported/questioned?
- 5) Which details are included/excluded?

These questions essentially identify who has authority in the article and who does not. For the purpose of this paper, I first counted the total number of sources in each article and recorded whether or not they were directly quoted or paraphrased. I then calculated the percentage of sources that were Native vs. non-Native and compared the average percentage of Native sources in national news outlets vs. Native news outlets. I also listed the sources in each article by order of appearance along with their title, in order to get an idea of how the positions and labels of sources influenced their authority in the article. For instance, in general, statements at the beginning and end of articles have the most authority, because they are what the reader first sees after the headline or, if they get through the whole article, the final thought they are left with (Perkins and Starosta, 2001). The titles of sources are also important; official titles such as government positions and tribal names give people or groups of people legitimacy and authority (Perkins and Starosta, 2001). All of these metrics allowed me to determine whether Native peoples or non-Natives had more authority in the articles.

Table 1. Basic information about each article. Articles highlighted in green are Native news outlets; Indianz.com/CNN (in blue) is a link on a Native news outlet to an article on CNN.

Publication	Date Published	Word Count
Bismark Tribune	9 Oct 2018	712
Wall Street Journal	9 Oct 2018	392
LA Times	5 Nov 2018	379
New York Times	19 Oct 2018	878
Washington Post	12 Oct 2018	1,177
NPR	13 Oct 2018	1,135
High Country News	24 Oct 2018	524

Native Sun News	17 Oct 2018	644
Native News Online	14 Oct 2018	245
Indianz.com/CNN	12 Oct 2018	505

Results

In general, Native news outlets gave more voice to Native Americans than non-Native outlets. The percentage of Native sources in each article varied greatly; however, the Native news outlets as a whole had an average of 56% Native sources, while non-Native outlets averaged 39% Native sources (see Table 2). Thus while there was substantial variation, Native Americans had more voice in Native news outlets as a whole.

An example of a source with strong Native voices was *High Country News*. Four out of five of the sources in the *High Country News* article were Native American; two were statements from a group of tribes and the Native American Rights Fund, and two were direct quotes from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe chairman and a tribal member. Direct quotes are more authoritative than paraphrased statements, and an imbalance of direct quotes between two viewpoints can shift reader's perspectives toward the side that was quoted (Gibson and Zillman, 1993). Thus articles that directly quoted Native sources conferred more authority on the perspectives of North Dakota tribes. The *High Country News* article began and ended with quotes from a tribal member and Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman Mike Faith, thus putting Native opinions in positions of authority. The only source supporting the decision, North Dakota secretary of State Al Jaeger, was quoted just before the end of the article and his statement that the law was meant to stop voter fraud was immediately refuted by the reporter and a final

statement by Mike Faith. Finally, the inclusion of a tribal government member and mention of specific tribes' names contributed to the authority of Native Americans in the article.

The high percentage of Native sources, prominent placement of those sources within the article and inclusion of specific tribal names all contributed to the strong voices of Native Americans in the *High Country News* article. In contrast to this were articles like the one in the *Wall Street Journal*, which included no Native sources, tribal names or even Native-affiliated organizations. While two of the sources, a political-science professor and the dissent opinion written by Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan, spoke to the potential negative effects of the decision, the article framed their quotes as impacting Heidi Heitkamp's reelection campaign rather than specifically disenfranchising Native voters. The *Wall Street Journal* article gave next to no voice to tribal members in North Dakota, who were merely labelled as the "Native American voters" who had contributed to Heitkamp's election in 2012.

The most balanced article of my analysis came from the *New York Times*. Exactly half of the sources were Native American, either advocacy groups or specific people, and half were part of the US government. Sub-sections in the article gave space for supporters and protesters of the law, and the article ended with one direct quote from Secretary of State Al Jaeger and one direct quote from Oliver and Barbara Semans, co-executives of a native advocacy group. Native Americans were able to speak for themselves, but U.S. government statements were also included.

These three examples illustrated how differently the same story sounded depending on who had the most authority in an article. What was a Supreme Court decision with potential negative effects on Heidi Heitkamp's run for reelection in one article was yet another attack of Native rights in another.

It is important to note that just because an article had a lower percentage of Native sources did not mean that the article was unsympathetic to the effects of the decision on Native communities. The category of “other sources” often included non-Native people or organizations who opposed the decision. For instance, the NPR article only had 31% Native sources, but the article overall focused on Native voter disenfranchisement. Other sympathetic sources included the ACLU, a staff member from Heidi Heitkamp’s campaign, and a quote from the *Bismark Tribune*. Only four of the articles had 50% or more Native sources, but most of them were at least somewhat sympathetic to the effects of the decision on Native communities.

One limitation to my analysis was the limited number of Native news outlets I found that covered this story. Of the four outlets I did find, only three had original reporting, and of those the quality of reporting was often not as high as for the national news outlets. For instance, the article in *Native News Online* was relatively short, and mostly directly quoted statements from Chairman Mike Faith and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. There was little additional analysis in the writing. Two of the sources in the *Native Sun News* article were reporters from Mother Jones and GQ, both left-biased publications. The reporters expressed strongly worded opinions that the law was a “Republican ploy” aimed at increasing power for “generally abhorrent people like Brett Kavanaugh” who might otherwise not win election (Chasing Hawk, 2018). While these opinions supported the case of Native Americans against the law, their strong wording and the fact that they were not from any kind of expert makes the article less professional overall.

Table 2. Percentages of native and non-native sources. Native outlets had an average of 56% Native sources; non-Native outlets had an average of 39% Native sources.

Publication	Total # Sources	% Native sources	% non-Native sources
Bismark Tribune	3	33%	67%
Wall Street Journal	3	0%	100%
LA Times	4	75%	25%
New York Times	8	50%	50%
Washington Post	12	45%	55%
NPR	13	31%	69%
High Country News	5	80%	20%
Native Sun News	5	20%	80%
Native News Online	2	100%	0%
Indianz.com/CNN	4	25%	75%

Discussion and Conclusions

In summary, I found that on average Native-focused news outlets gave more voice to Native opinions than non-Native outlets. There were a few caveats to this number, most importantly that I found fewer Native news articles than non-Native articles, and not all of the Native articles had as high-quality reporting. Articles that did give voice to Native opinions not only quoted more than one Native source but put Native sources in prominent positions within the article and included tribal names and tribal government labels. Some of the articles that had a lower percentage of Native sources were still sympathetic to Native voter suppression. The two articles that gave the least voice to Native Americans, from the *Bismark Tribune* and *Wall Street*

Journal, included many US government and named no specific Native people or tribes as sources.

Of these results, the category that most complicated my hypothesis were the articles that mentioned Native voter suppression but did not include many Native sources. Even though articles such as the one in NPR were sympathetic, was having non-Native people speak in place of Native sources still a form of suppression in the media? This question bears further research.

A second philosophical consideration of my results is neutrality. Since Native Americans have historically been silenced by the US government and dominant American culture, is an article like the one in the *New York Times* that gives even weight to US government and Native sources really neutral? One could argue that Native sources should be given more weight in all of the stories about them because their voices are so often ignored, an argument that in some ways resembles the push for affirmative action (Crosby et al., 2006).

A particularly troubling aspect of this research is the fact that, were it not for the effect of the North Dakota voter ID law on democrat Heidi Heitkamp's midterm election campaign, this story may not have even broken national news. Native Americans hardly ever make national news because they are not seen as major stakeholders in the readership (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017). From the perspective of national politics and media, in this case they were only important because their votes helped Heidi Heitkamp win the election in 2012. A few of the articles I analyzed still clearly reduced Native Americans to this frame, mentioning them only in relation to Heitkamp's 2018 campaign. However, even when stories that did give voice to Native Americans it is unclear if they would have received as much coverage if Heitkamp did not need their votes to win. This story makes me wonder how many other like it there are that simply do not get the coverage.

Since this story broke last fall, Native Americans have mostly receded back into silence in the national media. Giving voice to their stories remains a challenge, and there is room for further research in this area. Using sourcing to measure Native voices in the news is only one metric that could be used; historical context, framing and headline analysis could also provide insights on how the media portrays Native Americans. The media is not immune to prevalent prejudices in society, and recognizing this bias is an important step in addressing those issues.

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