

- Honor Code Statement

Whose Voice Gets Heard? Selective Sourcing and Native Voices in News Media

Introduction and Methods

On October 9, 2018, the Supreme Court voted to uphold a controversial voter ID law in North Dakota requiring voters to have residential addresses in order to vote. Native American communities in North Dakota united to protest the law because many tribal members only had post office boxes. Assigning thousands of residential addresses and printing new IDs before November's midterm elections would require rapid mobilization for tribal governments. The decision attracted more media attention than is usually given to Native American communities, who typically do not have a voice in major news outlets (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017).

For this analysis I wanted to see how coverage of the decision to uphold the voter ID law portrayed Native Americans. I examined local and regional media coverage by analyzing two articles from the *Bismark Tribune* and *High Country News*. The *Bismark Tribune* is a North Dakotan newspaper, while *High Country News* is a regional publication of news from around the western US. I focused on sourcing as a way to gauge how much of a voice Native Americans had in each article. Overall I found that the *Bismark Tribune* minimized Native voices and gave more authority to the US government, while *High Country News* highlighted perspectives from the Native community.

To analyze sourcing in each article I borrowed the five-point model developed in Perkins and Starosta (2001). This model asks five questions that indicate how different 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?

For the purpose of this paper I answered each question for both articles, then synthesized my findings into overall patterns of sourcing and authority in each article.

Findings

Table 1. Summary of sources quoted or paraphrased in each article and their order of appearance.

Bismark Tribune	High Country News
Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan dissent opinion	Howard Eagleman, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe member
Native American Rights Fund	Native American Rights Fund
ND Secretary of State Al Jaeger	Joint statement from several tribes
	Mike Faith, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman
	ND Secretary of State Al Jaeger
	Supporters of the decision
	Chairman Mike Faith (2 nd time)

The *Bismark Tribune* and *High Country News* gave authority to different sides of the story through the people they quoted and the positions of those sources within the article. The *Bismark Tribune* included more US government sources, primarily the dissenting Supreme Court opinion of justices Elena Kagan and Ruth Bader Ginsburg and a phone interview with North Dakota Secretary of State Al Jaeger. In addition to these quoted sources, the article was peppered with US government titles such as “U.S. District Court Judge Daniel Hoveland” or “Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem” (Amundson, 2018). The two mentions of Native Americans in the article were the “group of Native Americans” who appealed the voter ID law in the Supreme Court and a brief statement from the Native American Rights Fund about the decision. The article put the dissenting sources first, then devoted the final paragraphs to the phone interview with Al Jaeger.

The prominence of US government sources in the *Bismark Tribune*, coupled with the profusion of US government officials named in the article, gave authority to the government and those supporting the Supreme Court decision rather than those who thought it restricted voter rights. The article lacked any in-depth perspective from Native Americans, and the statement from the Native American Rights Fund was quickly rebuked by Al Jaeger's interview. This article is an example of how even stories that concern Native Americans can be written in a way that minimizes their voices.

In contrast to the weak presence of Native American communities in the *Bismark Tribune*, the *High Country News* article heavily emphasized Native American voices. The article included four different Native sources, including a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe government. The only US government official mentioned in the article was Al Jaeger, who was paraphrased in one brief paragraph. The dominance of Native sources in this article made the issue of voter confusion and suppression much more prominent than it seemed in the *Bismark Tribune*. A reader of *High Country News* might decide that the opinions of Al Jaeger and other supporters of the decision were suspect, while a reader of the *Bismark Tribune* might come to the opposite conclusion because of the many government sources cited in the article.

Conclusions

The contrast between these two articles shows how one story can be told in drastically different ways depending on who is given a voice. Unfortunately, Native American voices are most often excluded from news stories (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017). *High Country News* did not follow this trend, but it is also one of the only news outlets I have found with an entire section dedicated to tribal affairs. In the future I want to examine how national news media covered the

story of the North Dakota voter ID law. Given how little coverage Native American affairs typically receive, I expect national coverage to be more similar to the *Bismark Tribune* in terms of its treatment of Native sources than *High Country News*.

References

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