

# Portrayal of Native Americans in Mass Media

By Carlene MacGregor

Bemidji State University Student

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Instructor: Ashik Shafi, Ph.D.

## **Introduction**

Depictions of Native American peoples in mass media are studied mostly as a small part of other minority studies. Natives are frequently lumped into the “other” category of minorities when describing overall relationship statistics and study subjects. As an assignment for 1100-90, Mass Media & Society class, this paper looks at the ways Natives are portrayed by mass media, starting with a brief historical section for context then going into the Digital Age - 2000-2020 and the effects of those portrayals. Influences and effects of radio on Native Americans in mass media is not included. This is by no means a comprehensive work, but an attempt to illustrate a neglected aspect of minority coverage by mass media and its consequences.

## **Overview**

The first section is historical context moving to how Natives are portrayed from the 2000s. This is followed by a discussion of research primarily focused on minorities and specifically Native Americans. It includes the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The second section updates Native American’s portrayal in the digital age and studies relating examples of Native American treatment by mass media. Next are some suggestions for future studies. The conclusion is an overall view as well as the author’s opinions.

## Section One – Common Representations of Native Americans in Mass Media

The term “Native American” or “Indian” “Indigenous” or “American Indian” is used, both in scholarly works and common vernacular, to describe a vast array of Tribes who inhabited the North American continent prior to European colonization. Other words are used that are not so pleasant: “Redskin”, “savage”, “primitive”, “bloodthirsty savage” “lazy brave/squaw”, or “uncivilized”. More current ones are: “warrior”, “mascot”, “noble savage”, “relic of the past”, “drunkard”, “casino Indians”, and “spirit guide”. All are stereotypical names used to disenfranchise and demoralize ethnic people, much of the time to justify desires for domination and to profit from surrounding natural resources (Papademas 2009). For this paper, the chosen term of use will be “Native American” or “Native”.

From early colonial times into the 1830’s mass media use stereotyped terms to describe encounters with, and articles about, Native Americans. After the 1830’s is a marked shift in tone of most newspaper articles regarding Native Americans. This change is probably due to increased westward expansionism. Most media at that time are owned by wealthy Eastern moguls who speculate on new railroads and land availability to further enrich themselves (Krueger 2019). It is from this time that most stereotypes of Native Americans become entrenched. After the 1880s media coverage of Native Americans noticeably diminishes.

Early movies depict Native Americans using stereotypes, as witnessed by the 2009 documentary “Reel Indian” which traces Native American imagery in 100 years of film (Krueger 2019). Popular 20<sup>th</sup> century radio and television programs follow the same formula. Little effort is made to portray Native peoples in accurate, contemporary or positive ways. Some progress in popular sentiment is noticed when comparing the 1956 John Wayne cinema vehicle “The Searchers”, entirely based on one man's driving need to kill Native Americans, (Krueger 2009),

to Kevin Costner's 1990 "Dances with Wolves", a much more empathetic story. But it still showcases Western conquest. Regarding print media, much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century media largely ignores the presence of Native Americans, with small exceptions, as during the beginning of the civil rights movement when the American Indian Movement (AIM) begins. Treatment of minorities in media is brought to the forefront by various government committees investigating civil rights equality. Noted is the lack of racial disparity in newsrooms as well as persistent stereotypic descriptions of minorities. Also noted is journalism's use of white sources over minority ones and biased community media coverages (Papademas 2009, Tukachinsky 2016).

## **Section Two - Media Portrayals of Native Americans in the Digital Age**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century mass media is still clinging tightly to old stereotypes. Although some developments may point to coming changes. Most of the studies mentioned (Krueger 2019, Appel & Weber 2017, Leavitt, et al 2015, Kopaz & Lawson, 2011), examine the psychological and social cost of Native American invisibility. Recent studies of the effects of mass media on Native Americans have moved into new, promising territory. Researchers are using social media to compile verifiable, quantifiable data harvested from the vast amounts generated by social media users.

Several studies investigate the effects of mass media stereotyping on minorities and Native Americans. A comprehensive study based on experiments with 1,831 people describes the negative stereotyping effects on minority populations. *Stereotype Threat Theory (Social Identity Threat)* occurs when worries to conform to a negative view held by others causes feeling that threaten identity. This was first proposed by Steele (1997), Steele & Aronson, (1995), Appel &

Weber (2015). Its use may explain achievement gaps regarding minority populations. Although this study focuses on minorities rather than Native Americans in particular, impacts of stereotyping from mass media clearly indicate negative results on vulnerable populations (Appel & Weber 2017). Results of stereotyping and lack of representation varies widely. They range from the lack of representation on and behind media production to the homogenization of both tribal and personal identity. Included are aspects of self-stereotyping, stress effects, and decreased community identification. A noted is a “spotlight” effect means the highlighting of an atypical group member in a majority group setting (Levitt, et. al. 2015). For individuals the results manifest in undermining of self-understanding, low self-esteem, stress, situation avoidance, perceptions of limited career choices, feelings of exclusion, deindividuation, a sense of being invisible, a sense of unbelonging, and depression. Lack of appropriate role models also has negative effects on perceptions of expectations of achievement and uncertainty of social behavior.

Another study notes that rampant, pervasive stereotyping by mass media causes problems like self-identification, negative self-esteem, stress and depression. It goes on to posit the use of priming and positive images to counteract or combat negative depictions. Research on positive media intergroup exposure assumes undesirable media effects can be reduced through use of positive examples. Noted however is multiple positive depictions can be combined into a subgroup negating the effect if the overarching stereotypes stay intact (Tukachinsky 2015, Mastro & Tukachinsky 2011).

The impact of mass media on Native American populations is comprehensively detailed by a study of pervasive negative effects associated with identity and self-stereotyping (Leavitt, et al 2015). Native depictions in television, films, cartoons and video games are studied as

contributing factors. Results show a dramatic lack of Native American imagery in all formats. Further investigation examines not just the quantity, but also the quality of the images, which are nearly universally stereotypical. One interesting example is the results of Bing and Google search engines when “Native American” or “American Indian” terms are entered. The search shows 99% of the first 100 images are historical representations (Leavitt, et al 2015). The study iterates Native Americans are portrayed less often and more negatively.

Most studies offer many reasons for negative associations illustrated in stereotyping. Pervasive among studies is White dominance and ownership of current U.S. media outlets (Kopaz & Lawson, 2011). Another factors are strongly held societal beliefs on what “Native American” means; pervasive notions that Native Americans are historical relics; absence of personal contact with minority groups; media framing that excludes Native American topics unless they’re negative or controversial enough to generate income; little to no accurate teachings of historical Native related events; and no contemporary knowledge of Natives outside festivals.

A study of police use of lethal force on Native Americans is very pertinent to current events. The study takes place between 2014 and 2016, during the period prior and following the death of Michael Brown by police, before the George Floyd incident. It details statistics on the profound imbalance of news coverage of Native Americans deaths while in legal custody when compared to coverage of African American deaths in similar circumstances. Article data from high circulation newspapers collected over a 30-month period are analyzed statistically for comparisons. Included are several English-speaking newspapers outside of the U.S. Despite problems with correct identification of subjects as Native American, startling figures emerge. While in custody or by use of lethal force there are 635 African American deaths (606 mean, 29

women) and 53 Native American deaths (44 men, 9 women). When adjusted for population size comparison, Native deaths are 92% of African American deaths. However, based on newspaper article studies, African American deaths are reported 12 times more often than Native American deaths. The number of related African American articles is 95 times greater. Twenty of 22 articles about Native deaths feature one individual. Three quarters of Native American related news reported by wire are summarily excluded, framed out of mass media as either too mundane or irrelevant to white majority audiences. (Schroedel & Chin 2020).

Yet another interesting study is use social media data to demonstrate effects of prosocial imagery use to combat stereotypes. An online user study focuses on generated video content (UGV) from YouTube. It measures the user posted number and ratings of Native American themed videos (Kopacz & Lawton 2011). A sample of videos are evaluated based on qualitative and quantitative data, by number of star ratings, clothing, expressions, attitudes, context of locations, among other criteria. The study centers around the *para-social contact hypothesis* which argues that social media can reduce negative stereotyping and prejudice by exposing members to positive social contact with minorities. Results of the You-Tube study are split, with one camp favoring pre-1945 stereotypical images of Natives as romantic, brave, feathered headdress wearing, leather wrapped warriors from the old West. Contemporary video viewers in this camp also prefer Natives dressed in traditional regalia in face paint and/or intelligent looking, well-groomed individuals. The other camp prefers Native-related political issues, negative depictions of drinking or fighting or, counterintuitively, positive activist videos, which in the past are negatively viewed as radical. Most important of these results are the audience's favorable response to videos showing positive, counter-stereotypic Native Americans. Use of these images could strategically improve both Native and Non-Native ethnic perceptions.

Holders of strong stereotype views experience a sense of validation in recognizing like images in media. This confirms the *Stereotype Lift Theory*. Use of more prolific, non-stereotypic images proposes that positive imagery can ameliorate the negative effects of media stereotyping based on *Para-social Contact Hypothesis* (Kopacz & Lawton 2011).

Although steps are being made, more research regarding specific minorities and their use of social media as well as its negative or positive effects are needed. Suggestions of gaps in research include studying the negative effects of Native American stereotypes in advertising. It is the most pervasive of mass mediums. The effects of disidentification on career selections is suggested (Appel & Weber (2015). Studies of the effects of stereotypes on children linked to developmental stages are indicated (Tukachinsky 2015). More prolific information on history teachers and the application of Critical Race Theory to interject critical thinking into history lessons on minorities is needed. (Kreuger 2019). No studies have been done comparing Native American's psychological impacts with other minority groups or of the long-term consequences of pervasive, consistent stereotyping (Leavitt, et el 2015). Subsequent research on social media effects and suggestions to harness positive uses of ethnic/racial content should be yield yet more interesting aspects of Native Americans in self-curated social media.



## Conclusion

Through the studies cited it becomes obvious that Native Americans are being excluded from meaningful participation as full members of a fair and democratic society. This invisibility has major effects on many aspects of personal and tribal life. Efforts to study the long-term consequences are, like the studies, being ignored in favor of other, more exciting topics. In a way, Native American studies in the digital age are afflicted with the same blight seen in other mass media. That is further proof of non-voluntary ostracism.

A major challenge is dragging onto the public agenda the exclusion of Native Americans. Although positive changes may be mute if Natives join many outlying social groups who opt for creating their own media, bypassing mainstream sources all together. The trend of ethnic mainstream media coverage is, at this moment, overwhelmingly geared toward the Black Lives Matter movement. If history repeats itself, issues of any other related minorities will fade into the background or worse, be considered a “piggyback” movement and dismissed entirely.

Little specific research on the long-term psychological impact of mass media on Native Americans is being done. The few studies that have been done point to hope that more steps include positive models of Natives in all aspects of media, from traditional to digital media. Finally, more positive hope rests in efforts by museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. and the willingness of schools to educate and to share more accurate histories, with more balanced viewpoints.

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