

Native American Mascot Controversy and Mass Media Involvement: How the Media Play a Role in Promoting Racism through Native American Athletic Imagery

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 30 years, there has been a national debate as to whether school and professional sports teams should use Native American imagery as their mascots, nicknames, and/or logos. During the 1990s, scholars and media critics began to examine the use of Native American imagery in media. Research has shown that some people support the use of Native American athletic imagery depicted in media, while others oppose these. This research paper examines the use of Native American athletic imagery in media and viewpoints on media responsibility. By applying the framing and stereotype theories found in the literature, the author concludes that the media promote racism through the use of Native American athletic imagery.

For approximately 30 years, there has been a nationwide dispute as to whether school and professional sports teams should use Native American imagery as their mascots, nicknames, and/or logos. At a minimum, there are two conflicting viewpoints: (1) Keeping this imagery honors Native American people, supports nostalgic feelings, and saves funding; and (2) Keeping this imagery is offensive and degrading because it is sacred to Native Americans and perpetuates negative stereotypes. Supporters argue these images are complimentary, not “hurtful,” and are not offensive to all Native Americans. People in opposition cite research that shows lasting negative self-esteem effects on Native and non-Native individuals from

misconceived, cartoonish, and dehumanizing imagery. Throughout the 1990s, scholars and media critics began to examine the use of Native American imagery in media. This examination presented two conflicting viewpoints. Research has shown that some people support the use of Native American athletic imagery depicted in media, while others oppose the use. Supporters argue that the media should remain objective and report relevant news without showing their personal opinions. Opponents argue that the media can never be entirely objective and should consider the ethical and political concerns that surround this issue.

While some media outlets have spoken out against Native American athletic imagery, many have not. The *Oregonian* and the

Minneapolis Star Tribune have implemented policies that discontinued each newspaper's use of nicknames and imagery that might be offensive to some readers. Other news organizations who have not taken these steps reason that the media's responsibility is to only report news and not strive to generate societal change. This research paper seeks to explore and answer the following question: Do the media promote racism through Native American athletic imagery or support those who are offended? It will also consider media responsibility on controversial issues including news selections on the imagery controversy.

Review of the Literature: Native American Athletic Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos and Media Involvement

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, for approximately 30 years there has been a debate across the country as to whether public schools, colleges, universities, and professional sports teams should be allowed to use imagery of Native Americans as their athletic mascots, nicknames, and/or logos (Native American Mascots, 2008). The debate has focused on whether athletic teams using this imagery should be forced to change to some other image that does not reflect any racial group thereby, totally eliminating the depiction of Native Americans in this way. One component of the debate focuses on the involvement of mass media. Native American athletic imagery and mass media involvement provokes a discussion of whether the media promote racism by using the imagery or promote support through covering the controversy. It also introduces the discussion of whether the media should use Native American athletic imagery in news reports.

Over time, researchers have conducted studies and observations on Native American imagery depicted in mass media. Both the framing and stereotype theories

have been applied in some of these studies and observations. According to Baran and Davis (2012), the framing theory "assumes that people use their expectations of situations to make sense of them and determine their actions in them" (p. 354). Theorists state that the media contribute to these expectations. The stereotype theory is the "view that the mass media reinforce the dominant segment of society's existing patterns of attitudes and behavior toward minorities by perpetuating rigid and usually negative portrayals" (DeFlur & Dennis, 1994, p. 639).

Scholars have also found that most of the images in mass media are offensive and degrading to Native people and is not an honor, but is instead, a mockery of Native American culture, traditions, history, religion and self-worth because they portray Native Americans through stereotypes. These stereotypes "ridicule" Native Americans, create "lowered public expectations" and cause "reduced ability to interact with non-Native Americans" (Himebaugh, 1994 p. 3). According to Merskin (1998), the media symbolically annihilate Native Americans by "ignoring, excluding, marginalizing or trivializing a particular group" (p. 335). Merskin (1998) further states that "seeing oneself portrayed in the media can serve in constructing a view of oneself and of the world outside" (p. 335).

Although the issue of Native American athletic imagery has been discussed for many years, the involvement of media did not become widely discussed in "popular media" until the 1990s (Jensen, 1994). Scholars found that as opponents spoke out against the use, activism surrounding the issue continued to grow. With growing activism, the issue initiated changes within the media as well as on college campuses. Activism on the mascot issue grew even more with the founding of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media in Minnesota in 1991 (Hofmann,

2005). The coalition planned protests at various high-profile sporting events, such as the Super Bowl and World Series, which attracted the attention of the local and national media. Hofmann (2005) writes, "Scholarly journal articles and commentaries in newspapers forced schools and universities to examine their level of commitment to issues of diversity and to creating more welcoming environments for students, staff, and teachers" (p. 2).

Opposing Viewpoints

Researchers have found at least two distinct conflicting points of view on this debate. One point of view supports the use of Native American athletic imagery often depicted in the media. People who take the opposite point of view argue against the use of Native American sports imagery in media. When reviewing these perspectives, Jensen (1994) argues the media should consider their ethical and political responsibility, and if the media should make independent decisions to stop using Native American athletic imagery. The following information will analyze and respond to these points of view. Consideration will also be given as to whether the media promote or oppose racism toward Native Americans.

Supporting Views of Native American Athletic Imagery Depicted in Media

Individuals who support or defend Native American athletic imagery in media argue that the media should not take a stance and solely report on the issue. In 1992, Jensen (1994) conducted a study on journalists' views on the issue and found some journalists argued that "people are becoming too sensitive to the possible offensiveness in language and there was no reason for changing the names" (p. 19). These journalists labeled the movement to end the use of Native American images as

a misguided attempt to be "politically correct". Beadle (2002) writes, "Where will it end? Will the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame have to change its name because it's offensive to Irish people?" (p. 1). Jensen (1994) also found that the minority of journalists in the study reasoned "because the larger society should not take action, no action by the newspaper was necessary" (p. 19). However, the majority agreed that "the use of Native American names and images for teams was problematic, but concern that the newspaper erred in taking independent action" (p. 19).

Jensen (1994) found the most common response of journalists who supported or defended Native American athletic imagery in media was not that they accepted the imagery, but that media should remain objective and stay out of the controversy. Commonly, journalists argue that the media should "strive to be impartial or objective as possible. Reporters are neutral observers, not advocates or participants; they provide facts and details of stories, not their own opinions" (Bender, Davenport, Drager, & Fedler, 2009, p. 72). In 1992, the president of NBC stated, "Newspapers are supposed to be mirrors and tribunes and records of society, journals and registers of fact - that's how they got their names. Their news pages are not supposed to be edited to bring about social change" (Jensen, 1994, p. 20).

The following statement by Jensen (1994) presents the opinions of many commentators who support or feel no action should be taken to eliminate Native American athletic imagery in media. "Journalists do their job best when they hold up a mirror to the world and let readers see the truth. Sometimes that involves stating truths that are unpleasant or airing opinions with which many disagree. The job of professional editors is to take the heat, both from pressure groups in society and the government,

and print those truths in the face of complaints” (p. 20). Thus, supporting arguments reason it is a journalist’s obligation to not get involved, but to inform the public while remaining impartial.

Opposing Views of Native American Athletic Imagery Depicted in Media

Individuals who argue against the use of Native American athletic imagery in media reason that the media should engage and show concern on the issue. According to Denny (1999), the “media promotes racism by using offensive team names in newspaper headlines, television news and radio reporting” (p. 1). Thus the media support racism without knowing.

Some scholars and media critics argue that the journalistic principle of remaining objective can be difficult. “No human can be totally objective. Family, education, personal interests, religious, and political beliefs all influence how reporters cover stories and what stories they see as newsworthy” (Bender, Davenport, Drager, & Fedler, 2009, p. 136). One frequent argument against the imagery is the negative effects it has on Native and non-Native people, especially children. Opponents point out that no other ethnic group in the United States is portrayed as a mascot, and no other ethnic group would tolerate such portrayal. For some Native Americans, a sports team with an Indian mascot or logo “exacerbates a tragic American legacy of government-sanctioned genocide, bigotry, racism, and economic and political deprivation against Native American tribes” (Beadle, 2002, p. 1).

With the negative reminders that surround Native American imagery, many journalists reason media outlets should take into account their ethical responsibility. Journalists must consider whether it is ethical to use the imagery if it offends, harms, or alienates people. Journalists

make these ethical decisions daily. Tim McGuire, editor of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* said, “Journalists make hundreds of subjective decisions each week, such as choosing not to use the F word, or not calling people certain names that other people might call them or printing the names of rape victims” (NAJA, 2002, p. 1).

Opponents who work within the media have made numerous attempts towards eliminating the use of Native American athletic imagery in media. In 2002, the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), deemed Native American athletic imagery “racist” and “offensive” (p. 1). The association asked all news organizations nationwide to stop using sports mascots and nicknames that depict Native Americans. The NAJA wanted news organizations to adopt a zero tolerance policy and end the use of the racist imagery by 2004 (NAJA, 2002).

The efforts of *The Oregonian* have received a great deal of attention. In 1992, *The Oregonian* announced that it would not use names and imagery that might offend their readers. The statement released by editor stated: “*The Oregonian* will immediately discontinue using sports teams’ names and nicknames that many Americans feel are offensive to members of racial, religious, or ethnic groups. Initially, this will include references to Redskins, Redmen, Indians, and Braves” (Jensen, 1994, p. 18). According to Jensen (1994), the statement continues to state that the newspaper may drop other names if they are also considered offensive. The editor wrote the reason for the policy was “the belief that these names tend to perpetuate stereotypes that damage the dignity and self-respect of many people in our society” (p. 18).

According to Hofmann (2005), in 1993 the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* also applied a policy to discontinue the use of printing Native American imagery and to report news on teams by using the name of the

school or city.

The efforts of mass media have not only been by print media but also by broadcast. In 2001, a sportscaster in Tulsa, Oklahoma, agreed to address schools with Native American nicknames by the official school name. The sportscaster, Chris Plank, stated that he “finds the terms derogatory” and “can be offensive to a lot of people” (Wofford, 2001, p. 1). Plank’s viewpoint was shared by another sportscaster, Big Al Jerkens, who also agreed not to use the term “redskin(s)” when reporting. Jensen (1994) writes that a Washington, DC, radio station had a brief ban on the use of the word “redskin” in 1992.

Himebaugh (1994) suggests journalists can help make a difference by taking steps to eliminate stereotyping problems. Journalists should take time to learn about Native American culture and the struggles that Native people face. When mainstream media report on Native Americans, they tend to focus on negative news, such as alcoholism or poverty. However, mainstream media can help by reporting on positive news as well. Native American journalists have been taking actions to eliminate stereotypes in media. The NAJA launched a campaign that “examined the best and the worst of journalism,” which observed reporting on populations of color (p.2). Native Americans have also made progress regarding stereotypes by founding organizations that focus on the images of Native Americans in media. For example, Sonny Skyhawk founded the American Indians in Film, whose purpose is to “improve the image of Native Americans in motion pictures and television” (Himebaugh, 1994, p. 2).

Summary Perspective

Based on the research and literature presented, this author concludes that the media do promote racism through Native American athletic imagery. Also, some

media professionals do not support those who are offended by the imagery. Racism is promoted through the media agreeing to continue the use of the derogatory and offensive imagery of Native Americans but not using offensive imagery of other races or ethnic groups. The continued racism directed at Native Americans by the media can only result in adverse and damaging effects on Native Americans and non-Natives in society. As Beadle (2002) points out, the use of Native American imagery can serve as a reminder of the difficulties Native Americans have faced throughout the country’s history. The effects can demonstrate to society that it is “okay” to perceive Native Americans in a negative manner.

As journalism classes in universities teach, the media should adhere to the news value of objectivity but also the news values of ethics and avoiding stereotypes. According to Bender, Davenport, Drager, & Fedler, (2009), when the media use the imagery in stories, it consequently “demeans Native Americans by using descriptive words or phrases that cast them in a negative light. You should avoid such stereotypical words as wampum, warpath, brave and squaw” (p. 74).

To better understand my conclusion, one might consider both the framing and stereotype theories. The framing theory in media supports the idea that people use expectations to make sense of the world and can be strongly influenced by particular news sources. Research has shown that news coverage results in learning that is consistent with particular frames that structure news coverage (Nelson & Clawson, 1997; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). Thus, if news outlets dominate a single frame, learning will tend to be influenced by that frame. The framing theory can be applied to this argument about Native American athletic imagery because if the news portrays, or

frames, Native Americans with negative imagery, the result will be that society will view Native Americans in objectionable ways, as well.

According to DeFleur & Dennis (1994), the stereotype theory “aids in understanding how the media help perpetuate certain clusters of belief about particular categories of people” (p. 606).

The concept of stereotypes has been around for many years. One reason for this is because the media serves as a “channel” that passes stereotypes from generation to generation (DeFleur & Dennis, 2012). Mass media act as “the foundation from which meanings leading to prejudices and biases toward various categories of people can be learned” (DeFleur & Dennis, 2012, p. 598). By examining this theory, the author found that the media continuously perpetuate stereotypes of Native Americans by printing Native American athletic imagery. Because the media play a large role in society, as long as they continue to support Native American athletic imagery in news reports, society will consider this the norm. This will result in Native Americans being ostracized in society.

Conclusion

The use of Native American athletic mascots, nicknames, logos, and imagery can be a highly sensitive issue and continues to remain controversial. Based on a review of the literature, the following two conflicting viewpoints surrounding the issue become apparent: (1) Keeping this imagery honors Native people, supports nostalgic feelings, and saves funding; and (2) Keeping this imagery is offensive and degrading because it is sacred to Native Americans and perpetuates negative stereotypes. Arguments also focus on the media’s actions in terms of the controversy. Some argue that the media should remain objective while others argue the media cannot be completely objective and should act ethically and take actions to

support the debate.

Some actions have been taken by those who oppose the use of Native American athletic imagery in media. These actions include issuing policies against the imagery, speaking out against its use, and maintaining ethical responsibility on controversial issues. However, many people are critical of these actions because they contradict the journalistic value of objectivity. These people state the media should not take a stance on the issue of Native American athletic imagery.

This research project explored the issue of the use of Native American athletic imagery in media and attempted to answer the following question: Do the media promote racism through Native American athletic imagery or support those who are offended? This research has shown that there may not be a “perfect” answer to this question. Some argue that the media do not promote racism, society does. The media simply serve as a mirror for the world. Those who argue for some type of action against the use of this imagery argue the media can avoid possible support of racism by clearly covering this issue, other issues that concern Native Americans, and/or not using the imagery altogether. After applying the framing and stereotype theories to the issue, the author’s results suggest that the media do promote racism through Native American athletic imagery. The author concludes that as long as the media continue to use Native American athletic imagery, society will continue to have a marginalized view of Native Americans.

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