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The University of Montana

# Indigenous Representation in the Media and the Importance of Personal Narrative

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Despite an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, indigenous groups are still incredibly underrepresented in the media. Media can include any sort of publication, such as news and magazine articles, novels, radio broadcasts, television series and films. In order to better represent indigenous people in the media, journalists and media producers must become more culturally aware while also allowing indigenous people to have greater control of their personal narratives in the media.

Stories have been used to pass down knowledge from generation to generation. Storytelling, especially oral storytelling, has played an especially large role in indigenous cultures. Storytelling in indigenous culture was, and continues to be, a way to resist losing elements of their culture such as language, history and cosmology to assimilation (Iseke, 2013.) Indigenous storytelling can also be seen as an act of decolonization and resistance (Sium and Ritskes, 2013.)

Using elements of storytelling, such as personal narrative, has been found to increase an audience's comprehension of another culture (Gay, 2010) A narrative is a tool that is used to structure a story and adds meaning to a sequence of events (Schirato and Yell, 2000.) The personal narrative focuses on an individual telling their story, recounting their experiences and their world as they see it.

Personal narratives can work to discredit negative stereotypes that have been absorbed as fact by audiences who do not often interact with people from different cultures. Without firsthand interaction, many people would receive most of their information about a different culture online or through social media, which may not be accurate (Gay, 2013.)

However, a personal narrative can still be utilized even if the audience has no face-to-face interaction with the narrator, as the story can appear in any form of media such as writing, television and film. The personal narrative is anchored with an individual, allowing the audience to identify with the narrator, even if the narrator's context and culture are completely foreign. The use of personal narrative can therefore be used as an effective tool to build cultural awareness by connecting the audience to someone on a personal level rather than relying on statistics or inaccurate stereotypes (Gay, 2010.) The personal level of these stories not only helps engage the audience, but also produce "feelings of affinity" between the narrator and audience, which can deepen the connection and promote even better cultural awareness despite the differences between people's lives (Gay, 2010.)

The use of personal narrative not only informs the audience of another's experience but it can also act as a way to validate the experiences of the narrator and those with similar experiences (Schirato and Yell, 2000.) Validation is a key factor in media representation for underrepresented and marginalized groups in the media, as their stories have already been suppressed by larger groups. This is especially important when looking at indigenous cultures and their experiences throughout history compared to the majority, non-indigenous experience and perception.

Therefore using personal narratives in storytelling not only helps educate those viewing or reading the story but it can also empower the narrator because they can control their own story. They recount their experiences rather than having them translated out to the audience by a middle-man. Stories are then able educate people about themselves and about others (Gay, 2010.) This element of control leads to some sense of self-determination, an important element

when looking at indigenous rights and activism. Self-determination can also be applied to storytelling as a way to gain control over the indigenous narrative as a whole and as individuals.

Controlling the narrative is especially important for indigenous cultures that have been previously burned in media through negative stereotypes and biased portrayals, even in the news. Native Americans and Aboriginals have often been “the object of other peoples’ image-making” (Ginsburg in Wilson, 2008). Being talked about and being portrayed by others, rather than being able to represent themselves, then feeds into the negative stereotypes and biases, including the ideas of indigenous people being criminals, “backwards” or as “vanishing” from history (Fort, 2013.) If indigenous people don’t have the opportunity to represent themselves in stories, or they’re only talked about rather than listened to, the non-indigenous audience’s perception will continue to be inaccurate.

Persistent underrepresentation in the media also adds to the idea of the indigenous population “vanishing” from history. Indigenous people actually make up about 5% of the world’s population (The World Bank, 2016.) To break it down even further, approximately 2% of the population of the U.S. was Native American and Alaskan Native, including the combination of more than one race, in 2015 (US Census Bureau, 2016.) Canada’s Aboriginal population made up about 4.3% of the country’s total population in 2011 (Statistics Canada, n.d.) In Australia, about 3% of the population identified as Aboriginal in a 2011 report (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013.) Meanwhile, New Zealand has a relatively large indigenous population, with a 15% Māori population in 2015 (Stats NZ, n.d.) So while indigenous populations can make up anywhere from 2 to 15% of a country’s total population, they do not appear in a proportional amount of the world’s news coverage and are underrepresented in modern media.

According to a Media Monitoring Report by Journalists for Human Rights, only 0.46% of news media coverage from 2012 to 2013 focused on the indigenous people of Ontario, Canada (Pierro, 2013.) The study also measured the tone and how the indigenous people were depicted in stories during this period, finding that 41% of the news stories had a neutral tone, 20% were positive and 39% were negative (Pierro, 2013.)

The study noted that news coverage varied depending on events, such as activist movements or holidays, which would produce a “spike” in coverage. Events such as the Idle No More movement in January 2013 produced both positive and negative coverage. Some stories supported the blockades and protestors in Ontario while others deemed the measures extreme and unnecessary (Pierro, 2013.) Over time, the negative coverage of the movement dominated, depicting the indigenous protestors as destructive and as criminals, especially in opinion pieces and editorial columns (Pierro, 2013.)

Cindy Blackstock analyzed the coverage of the movement and found that the news stories reported mostly on the actions of the Idle No More protest rather than the reasons behind it. The Idle No More movement was in fact a response to the government’s introduction of a bill that could weaken environmental protection laws, particularly for water on lands reserved for indigenous peoples (Makuch, 2013.) Part of this, Blackstock noted, could be that photos and videos of protestors in action are more sensationalized and eye catching than a group of statistics illustrating the government violating the rights of indigenous peoples or showing all of the failed plans mean to help. (Blackstock in Pierro, 2013). Sensationalized media of indigenous people in efforts to gain mainstream readers can continue to perpetuate the negative stereotypes based on a shallow understanding of the indigenous narrative and context. Sensationalizing reports also adds to inaccuracy and takes away the context of what’s actually happening.

From 2011 to 2013 there was an 11% increase in negative coverage of indigenous peoples in Ontario. However, the amount of coverage also increased from 0.15% to 0.46% of the total news coverage (Pierro, 2013). Jorge Barrera noted that the chronic underrepresentation of Aboriginal people in news media is nothing new, and the “spikes” only occur when “events fit certain narrative streams” (Barrera in Pierro, 2013). In the 2012-2013 data there were two “flashpoints” that accounted for 26% of the total coverage, including the Idle No More protests and the hunger strike of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence (Barrera in Pierro, 2013). Before and after those protests, coverage of indigenous issues was much lower.

The media coverage of the Idle No More protests was largely done from an outsider perspective. As Barrera noted, high media coverage correlated with events that fit into a larger narrative. But event coverage is a one-off. By disregarding root causes of the movement and protest, many news stories negated the larger context of the indigenous issues in Ontario. Similar patterns in media coverage can be seen in North America with the protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Much of the Standing Rock coverage was considered “shallow” and not the audience’s problem (Clark, 2016). Many of the photos and B-roll video clips portrayed the protestors in traditional clothing, dancing or drumming. While this was accurate footage and the traditional practices and clothing played an important role in the ceremonies and the meaning behind the protest, it also added to the idea that this was a completely different group of people from the audience (Clark, 2016.) This divide makes it easier to shrug off covering indigenous issues in the news or portraying them as a niche market. Focusing on the protestors as a group instead of as individuals could also become a barrier to the audience as they would have no personal narrative to anchor them in the context of indigenous issues.

Furthermore, the constant use of traditional clothing and activities ignores the fact that many indigenous people live in urban areas and deal with modern problems, such as paying bills and going to work just like anyone else (Clark, 2016.) It's an easy archetype to play off of when pitching a story to a news editor, as Duncan McCue noted on Reporting in Indigenous Communities. When the audience thinks of an indigenous culture, they're likely to think of an older and traditional portrayal with feathered regalia, drums, etc. In fact, a majority of stories about indigenous people focus on the "WD4" which stands for "warrior" and the four "D's" of dancing, drinking, drumming and dead. (McCue, n.d.)

The shallow and often stereotypical coverage of indigenous people and indigenous issues has led to a type of media renaissance where indigenous people are taking it upon themselves to share their stories and cover indigenous issues. One example is in New Zealand, where the indigenous Māori people have created Māori Television; an independent television station dedicated to both news coverage and serialized programs. They are able to add the Māori perspective to television. One of their missions is to protect and revitalize the Māori language, which is considered a *taonga* or "treasure" of New Zealand (Māori Television, n.d.) Language, especially in indigenous cultures, is incredibly important to both cultural protection and cultural understanding (Worley, 2009.) To promote and protect their indigenous language, many of Māori Television's programs are spoken in Māori, such as the action-adventure series "Kairākau" and the language-learning show "Kōrero Mai."

The television station's focus on language and culture acts as a way to resist assimilation and also provides a literal channel for Māori people to share their stories and reach a wider audience. It also keeps the Māori language and culture in the mainstream media, combating the "vanishing Indian" stereotype by showing modern Māori people and creating content that



continues to showcase the culture and community. The station may still be considered niche and appealing to a smaller audience of New Zealand, but the station's presence on the air allows for more indigenous participation in the media both as viewers and producers. By participating in storytelling and sharing their personal narratives or stories based in their cultural context, indigenous people are able to "reassert their identity" into the mainstream rather than continue being stereotyped by ignorant coverage (Worley, 2009.)

The indigenous perspective can also make great contributions to fictional works in the media, such as books, TV series and films. Personal narratives can still be used by fictional characters in their arcs, allowing the audience to empathize with them and explore a new cultural context as they follow the character through the story. What's more, indigenous media may include a certain aesthetic that is lacking from most mainstream productions.

The indigenous aesthetic, as described in Jennifer Gauthier's essay titled "Lest Others Speak for Us: the Neglected Roots and Uncertain Future of Māori Cinema," can be different from mainstream western aesthetic in media because it relies on indigenous culture and possibly different communication styles. For example, the act of listening is taken very seriously in Māori culture and so films made by Māori producers and crewmembers behind the scenes may use technology, such as cameras and microphones, to "listen" to the actors in the story differently. The director could do this by using zoom lenses and sound rigs like slanted microphones to make the camera an anonymous listener in the scene (Gauthier in Stewart, 2008.)

Māori cinema may also be slower paced, taking it's time and focusing on details. In contrast, the "Pakeha," or European descendant of New Zealand, style of filmmaking is more linear with a defined purpose, like asserting an argument (Gauthier in Stewart, 2008.) Similar

themes can be found in the communication in Blackfeet culture in the U.S., with listening being a key value in conversation and the act of speaking being seen as something for and within the community (Carbaugh, 2005.)

Since communication style is such a large part of culture, the works produced in indigenous media, by and for indigenous people, with their own aesthetic can also be a way of portraying their culture and context. It can also press the audience to be more open-minded or try to understand a different style of communication while watching the movie. However, if they are hooked onto the story, or empathizing with the characters, they may be more likely to stick with the movie even if it's not the type of aesthetic or style that they're comfortable with.

Indigenous participation in the media can help cover indigenous issues with more accuracy by bypassing stereotypes based on shallow and sensationalized coverage. Indigenous production of films can also be useful when bringing cultural contexts, aesthetics and communication styles to audiences. Meanwhile, understanding cultural differences in communication and having personal narratives as part of storytelling can also help non-indigenous journalists and media producers better represent indigenous people and indigenous issues.

Consuming media made by indigenous people is a factor in growing cultural awareness, as is actually conversing with indigenous people about their culture. However, cultivating an awareness of indigenous culture in an educational setting is also important. Expanding school curriculums to cover indigenous history, culture and current events could help many journalists and media producers create a foundation for reporting on or creating stories with indigenous people and indigenous issues (Pierro, 2013). For example, Victoria University of Wellington in

New Zealand has a very robust Māori studies department that offers courses in Māori culture, history and the Māori language. The University of Montana also offers Native American studies, including courses specifically designated to learning about sovereignty, ecological perspectives and cosmology.

Adding courses that combine journalism or film studies to indigenous studies could also be useful when looking to increase non-indigenous cultural awareness in the media. The University of Montana's Native News Project is a good example of focusing on the actual reporting of indigenous issues. The classroom and pre-reporting phase of the course focuses on background knowledge of the culture with guest lecturers, and looked at different Indian Reservations and the respective tribes of Montana. Reading previous issues of Native News and coverage of Standing Rock also allowed students to understand the differences between good and accurate coverage over stereotypical and shallow coverage. The pre-reporting phase was able to inform reporters and photojournalists on current indigenous issues. It also provided an opportunity for students to recognize their ignorance or possible biases of indigenous issues and culture before they traveled to the reservation they would be reporting on.

In the field reporting on a reservation also provided the chance for student reporters and photojournalists to actually speak with Native American people on current issues. Journalistic interviews could fall under the category of personal narrative as the interviewee is answering questions based on their experience and sharing elements of their life with a reporter. Being part of a story, and having their words accurately published, could also provide that validating quality of sharing a personal narrative with the audience. However, this is only if the reporter can accurately tell the other person's story. The downside of an interview as personal narrative is that the interviewee is unable to control their story once it's in the reporter's notebook. Thus, it is

important for reporters to also have an understanding of indigenous culture, history and events when reporting on indigenous issues. The indigenous population is already being vastly underrepresented in the news media, so each article could weigh more in the audience's perception of indigenous people and indigenous issues.

In conclusion, there needs to be more indigenous participation and self-representation in media production as well as more education for non-indigenous reporters and media producers if there is to be fuller and more accurate portrayals of the indigenous population. Increasing indigenous representation in the media could also work to build a non-indigenous audience's awareness of the indigenous experience by using personal narratives, through fictional characters or the journalistic interviews of the real and modern people who are living through the indigenous issues that the story is covering. All of this could then combat the idea of the "vanishing Indian" in a globalizing world while also bringing more public awareness and the indigenous perspective and voice to both creating a more inclusive historical context and covering current issues.

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