

2021 NAJA Media Spotlight Report

An analysis by the Native American Journalists Association of the *New York Times*' coverage of Indigenous topics from 2015-2021

In the 2021 Media Spotlight Report, more than half of the New York Times articles used stereotypes found on the NAJA Bingo Card.

Introduction: Reasoning, Sample, & Method

In view of continual problematic media coverage of Indian Country, the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) published the 2021 NAJA Media Spotlight Report which specifically examines the New York Times and their coverage of Indian Country in the United States and other Indigenous communities around the world. News coverage of Indian Country and Indigenous communities that utilizes five or more [NAJA Bingo Card](#) words (e.g., alcohol, violence, drumming, poor education, or horses), otherwise known as Native American clichés or stereotypes, may be categorized as problematic, and create specific harmful frames detrimental to Indigenous communities. These issues go hand-in-hand and can advance inaccurate depictions of Indigenous communities, which ultimately highlights the salience of this report.

The analysis primarily consists of breaking news and opinion editorials; however, other genres such as obituaries and sports were included if an Indigenous topic was at the forefront of the story. Articles from the past five years were included within the analysis, starting with a sports article published March 2, 2015, and ending with a climate and environmental story on February 22, 2021. A keyword search in the *Times*' database was used to find all of the articles compiled in the report. The searched words were: Native, tribe, Native American, Indigenous, First Nation,

and Indian. In total, 300 articles were examined. Initially, 356 were gathered, but this number was trimmed due to time constraints and relevancy. Articles were taken out of the analysis if the main idea did not pertain to an Indigenous person, idea, or community. Multimedia stories (i.e., photo essays with minimal text and mini documentaries) were excluded from the report, but they remain salient to journalistic storytelling and should be kept in mind for future studies.

Table 1

Year	NYT Print and Digital Subscribers	Number of Articles included in Analysis
2015	2.3 million	27
2016	2.8 million	34
2017	3.6 million	54
2018	4.2 million	55
2019	5.3 million	36

2020	7.5 million	78
2021	7.8 million	15

(The source for this data is cited in the reference section of the report.)

NAJA 2017 Native American Journalism Fellow and current master’s student in the Scripps Journalism School at Ohio University, Sarah Liese (Navajo and Chippewa Cree), conducted the analysis, under the direction of the NAJA Board of Directors and former NAJA Vice President Dr. Victoria LaPoe (Cherokee). An additional Ohio University Scripps journalism master’s student, Allyson Woellert assisted Liese with the report, gathering over half of the *New York Times* articles and performing 25 percent of the analysis. Both Liese and Woellert ensured validity by following the same codebook, which contained the following variables: date of publication, author of the story, number of sources (i.e., categorized as Indigenous or non-Indigenous), NAJA Bingo Card words used, and themes presented in the article.

Analysis

At the heart of the analysis was the assessment of NAJA Bingo Card words and their existence within the data. The NAJA Bingo Card may sound jovial, but it is a paramount guide for Indigenous reporting. The purpose of the card is to assist journalists when they cover Indian Country and raise awareness of their potential reliance of Native American stereotypes. If five or more bingo words are used, then a “bingo” is achieved. In this case, the outcome of this bingo is not a reward and it suggests that the author may be relying on multiple stereotypes in their

reporting. If a bingo is acquired, the journalist should comprehensively consider performing a mindful correction that steers away from a dependence on clichés.

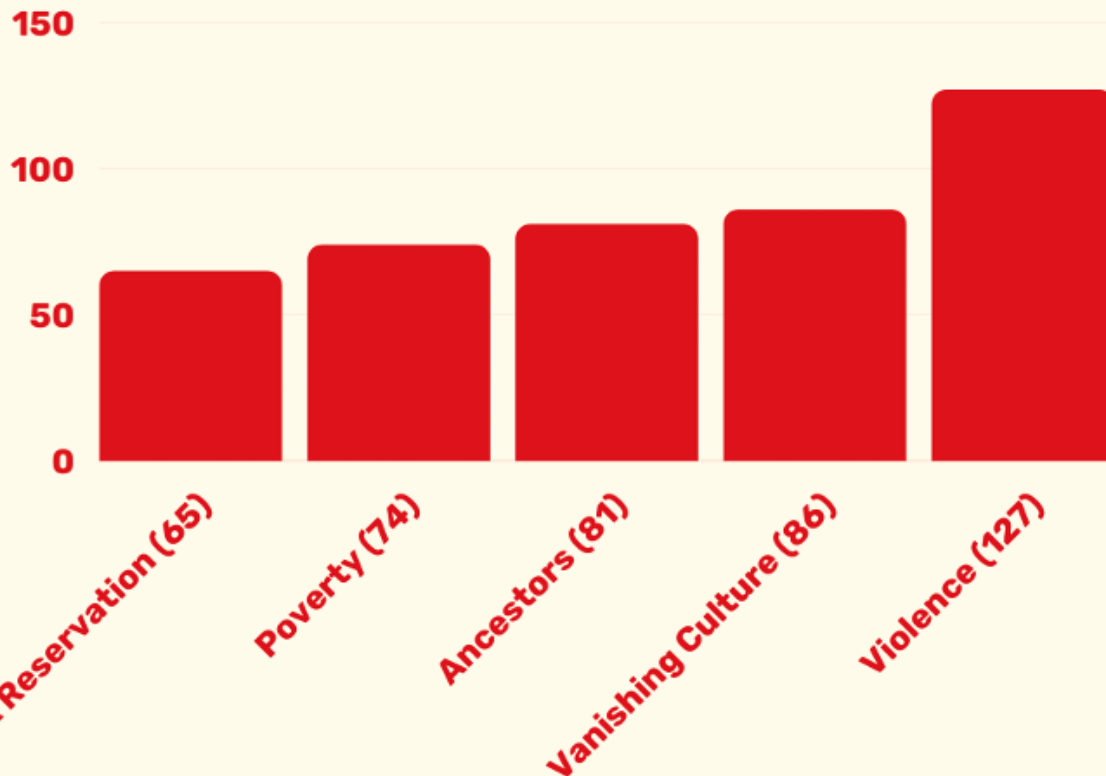
In this analysis, 804 total stereotypes were identified in the collected data. Out of the 300 articles, 25 percent utilized one bingo card word, while 35 percent of articles included two or more stereotypes. The term “violence” was most frequently used in the *New York Times*’ coverage, and was found in more than 40 percent of the articles (i.e., 127)¹ followed by “vanishing culture” (i.e., found in 86 articles)² and reference to “ancestors” (i.e., found in 81 articles).

Graph 1

¹ Violence was tracked according to the broader idea of the word, not simply the specific word itself. An example is a story that was published in 2017, “[The Youth Group that Launched a Movement at Standing Rock](#).” Within this story, multiple layers of violence are discussed such as suicide, violence in the household, abuse, assault, murder, beatings, and police violence. Though violence is a prevalent theme throughout the article, it was only marked once on the bingo card. The important thing to note is that all of the violent layers noted previously, are examples of violence that would constitute a marking on the bingo card.

² Similar to the way violence was counted, vanishing culture was considered a bingo word not by the word alone, but by the larger context. For example, in the article called “[Canada, Too, Faces a Reckoning With History and Racism](#),” the words “cultural genocide” were used. Since that phrase is synonymous with vanishing culture, the article was marked for the vanishing culture bingo word. Other articles that reference pieces of Indigenous culture that were disappearing or taken away were also counted in the analysis.

Most clichéd and stereotypical references



One reason for this finding could be that these clichés share an overlap with a plethora of Indigenous communities around the world, rather than solely focus on North America where the clichés of “casino” and “warrior” might be more common. The NAJA Bingo Card words that were least likely to be used by the newspaper were “diabetes” (i.e., found in two articles), “plight” (i.e., found in eight articles), and “drumming” (i.e., found in 10 articles). It should be noted that the theme of health disparities did occur in multiple articles, though the main health issues discussed did not directly state the word “diabetes,” except for the two marked articles. Additionally, the theme of “plight” was addressed, especially when discussing the history of

colonization; however, what was counted in the analysis was when the word “plight” was precisely stated.

In terms of five or more stereotypes utilized within the *New York Times*’ articles, 18 percent of the articles within the analysis scored a bingo. Out of the 55 articles that relied heavily on stereotypes, the year 2020 showcased the highest number of clichéd articles. The quantity of articles and subsequent bingos shows a probable correlation. Moreover, the more the articles in the yearly sample, the more bingos that were discovered overall, perhaps highlighting a need for guidance in covering Indian Country beyond stereotypes. Other examples of the NAJA Bingo Card words can be found by clicking [here](#).

Table 1.2

Year	Total Number of Articles N (total)= 300	Articles with Bingos	Percentage of Bingos
2015	27	5	19 %
2016	34	9	27 %
2017	54	9	17 %
2018	55	10	18 %

2019	36	7	19 %
2020	81	14	17 %
2021	13	1	8 %

Another facet of the research was centered around the employment of Indigenous authors and sources. These factors were taken into account. The researchers found that the number of Indigenous authors used to report Indigenous-focused stories increased as the years progressed, with a peak in Indigenous authors in 2020. Of the articles written by Indigenous reporters, the majority (i.e., 60 percent) showcased an equal number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources— since all articles in this category were opinion editorials that did not utilize sources.

Table 1.3

Year	Articles with equal number of sources (non-Indigenous vs. Indigenous)	Articles with more non-Indigenous sources	Articles with more Indigenous sources
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2015	8	13	6
2016	5	16	13
2017	11	17	26
2018	9	23	23
2019	14	8	14
2020	26	24	31
2021	0	7	6

25 percent of the articles written by Indigenous authors used more Indigenous sources, while about 13 percent utilized more non-Indigenous sources. The articles that were written by the NYT Editorial Board were classified as non-Indigenous based on their diversity and inclusion reports. Additionally, Indigenous authors were classified due to their biographies published within the *New York Times*' database and online.

Table 1. 4

Year	Non-Indigenous Author	Indigenous Author
2015	27	0
2016	33	1
2017	52	2
2018	53	2
2019	35	1
2020	72	9
2021	13	0

When comparing Indigenous authors to non-Indigenous authors, two Indigenous authors (i.e., about 13 percent) did utilize five or more NAJA Bingo Card words, while the majority (i.e., about 53 percent) employed three or less stereotyped words.

Proposed Solutions

The growth in Indigenous stories is a positive trend that was noticed in the analysis, and the hope is that this trend continues with fervor while the number of bingos decreases. Looking toward the future, one way to avoid falling into the trap of scoring a bingo resides in more diverse newsrooms. In a recent “Call to Action” report, the *Times* expressed a desire to change and better their intentions in terms of their company’s diversity and inclusion. Within this document, the number of individuals identified as “Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander” bounced from zero to one more than once, when it came to employment and leadership positions. This demographic exhibited the lowest representation in the newsroom. “American Indian / Alaskan Native” was not a category, nor was the term “Indigenous.” One solution is to employ multiple Indigenous journalists in reporter and editor, and management positions. Another solution is to create a healthy environment for the reporter and editor to thrive. These two actions will promote more thoughtful and veracious storytelling and disperse the weighty responsibility of deciding what is the best way to report on Indigenous communities, as there are over 570 tribal nations in the United States alone and Indigenous people and communities are not monolithic. Utilizing more Indigenous sources is another way to ensure that their voices are present in the story, while reducing the notion that Native Americans remain in the past. When in doubt, consulting an Indigenous expert and referencing the NAJA Bingo Card are reliable resources to minimize harm.

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