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Indigenous journalists: Perceptions of mainstream media coverage of indigenous affairs and climate change

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Abstract

Indigenous journalism plays an increasingly important role in modern media. It fulfils important functions such as creating counter-narratives, empowering local communities and acting as watchdog. Representations of Indigenous peoples in traditional media are often stereotyped, lacking in detail, or factually incorrect. To understand the balance in this complex media ecosystem, this study investigated Indigenous journalists' perceptions of traditional media coverage of indigenous stories and Indigenous journalists' relationships with non-Indigenous journalists. Based on 20 in-depth interviews conducted with Indigenous journalists around the world, the study confirms that there is a gap between mainstream and Indigenous media, and that there is generally little trust in mainstream media representations of Indigenous communities. This study is a first brick in a foundation to build greater understanding between mainstream and Indigenous media and to consider possible ways forward.

Keywords

Indigenous journalism, climate change, Indigenous knowledge

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Introduction

Indigenous journalism

As a non-Indigenous researcher and journalist with a main interest in climate journalism and decolonisation, studying the literature I, Sara Moraca, noticed a gap in the study of the perceptions of Indigenous journalists on the topics covered in this study. I thought it could be interesting to be able to structure interviews in depth.

The realm of Indigenous journalism is characterised by conceptual disagreement, both in its definition and its functions. Because biased representations of Indigenous communities replete with stereotypes and factually incorrect statements are common, Indigenous communities have desired a split from mainstream media to create their own mediatic cultural framework (Meadows 2009). Gema Tabares Mèrino first introduced the concept of Indigenous journalism and identified three dimensions: it must respond to the needs of Indigenous communities; it must highlight the crisis in the Western world and propose the Indigenous as a viable alternative; and it must serve the interests of Indigenous communities with its underlying technology (Gema Tabares Mèrino cited in Krøvel 2017). Additional dimensions have been proposed to highlight other functions and goals (Hanusch 2013):

- Indigenous journalism may protect Indigenous communities in the role of watchdog, monitoring the activity of community leaders.
- Indigenous journalism can empower Indigenous communities or create alternative public spaces for Indigenous communities.
- Indigenous journalism can revitalise Indigenous languages that are essential parts of native culture, as in the case of the Sàmi people or of some of the European linguistic minorities where journalism has revitalised languages (Pietikäinen 2008; Zabaleta et al. 2010).
- Indigenous journalism can create culturally appropriate journalism that goes beyond highlighting minority culture and actually reports on it.
- Indigenous journalism can create alternatives to mainstream media narratives.

Another important goal of Indigenous journalism is to strengthen Indigenous voices in the public sphere (Gift et al. 2019; Tomaselli 2003; Waller 2010). Indigenous journalism primarily exists in response to mainstream western journalism, and it aims to counter the image of marginalised and excluded Indigenous communities (Bhroin et al. 2021). By extension, therefore, indigenous journalism also has among its objectives that of giving voice to those excluded from having a space in the public sphere and offering a counter narrative to mainstream reporting. However, the experience of marginalisation is not perceived and lived by all members of Indigenous communities equally, so this concept may not be useful on a broader scale in the literature (Bhroin et al. 2021).

Indigenous media are tools for promoting Indigenous culture and language, as well as a way for Indigenous communities to represent themselves and fight for human rights because Indigenous people have historically had little access to media resources and

fewer opportunities to make their voices heard (Wilson and Stewart 2008; Alia 2010). Digital technologies have made possible greater public engagement and citizen mobilisation, prompting unexpected forms of political participation (Rendueles and Sádaba 2019). Digital Indigenous news systems create greater engagement with their audiences and by doing so, enhance the economic stability of the media (Silva and Sanseverino 2020). Moreover, social, technological and political changes influence media agenda priorities in terms of what is shown to the public (Hess & Waller 2015; Waller 2010). Indigenous journalism has also been analysed through the lenses of cultural journalism (Ross 2016) and development journalism (Olise 2010).

Misrepresentation in mainstream media

Media portrayals of Indigenous peoples around the world often invoke negative stereotypes (Merskin 1998, 2010; Moore and Lanthorn 2017). Native Americans, for example, are often associated with crime stories, alcohol abuse and violence (La Poe and La Poe, 2017). Moreover, Native Americans are excluded from many narratives of American life (Leavitt et al. 2015). Media coverage of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is similarly full of prejudice and sensationalism, with little journalistic awareness of it (Meadows 2001). Mainstream media coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have died in law enforcement custody has highlighted only the more problematic aspects of their cases, neglecting to use detailed narratives and citing more official sources, such as police records, than Aboriginal voices (Bacon 2005). Similarly, Sàmi people of northern Finland, Norway, Swede, and Russia report dissatisfaction with mainstream media that portrays them as 'greedy', 'dirty' and 'prone to excessive drinking' (Sami UN Resolution on Prevention of Discrimination 1997; Pietikäinen 2003). The vision in the common imagining of Sàmi as illiterate and with an 'aboriginal dominated nature' is bolstered by tourism literature portraying them in traditional reindeer-skin clothing, similar to how other Indigenous peoples are commonly portrayed (Kuokkanen 1999). Between 1985 and 1993, there was at least one non-Sàmi majority voice in every Sàmi news story, while the minority Sàmi voice was only present in one in three articles (Pietikäinen 2003).

Mainstream media and Indigenous media, by excluding or including Indigenous voices in their coverage of Indigenous affairs, provide differentiated access to a balanced view of the facts (Burrows 2018). Indigenous media is often not held in the same regard as mainstream media. Language is important, too. English-speaking journalists and the English-language newspapers and magazines they write for, for example, are more highly regarded than Indigenous journalists and their newspapers and magazines. Further, English-speaking journalists in Zimbabwe believe that working for an Indigenous outlet would be unprofessional and insufficiently stimulating, highlighting lingering colonial attitudes (Chibuwe and Salawe 2020).

Methods

Indigenous journalists from the United States (four), India (three), Mexico (two), Aotearoa (New Zealand) (one), Finland (three), Africa (one), Nepal (two), Canada (three), and Norway (one) were interviewed between September 2021 and February 2022. The number of African journalists is particularly low compared to the size of the continent, but it is difficult to contact Indigenous journalists there through digital channels. The sample

included eight men and 12 women, ranging in age from 19 to 65 years. There were no questions about the gender binary.

Journalists were contacted by email, after being identified via a keyword search for 'Indigenous journalist' on Twitter and Google. I sent messages by email or direct message to the journalists I identified on Twitter. I sent emails to the journalists I identified on professional sites. I waited 10 days before sending polite follow-up messages. I contacted 139 journalists, and 24 responded. Four later refused to participate in the interview as they felt that me being a non-Indigenous researcher should disqualify me from conducting the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were used to investigate Indigenous journalist perceptions of mainstream media coverage of Indigenous affairs, their relationship with non-Indigenous journalists, and their ideas about the future of Indigenous journalism. The questions were developed based on an analysis of the literature and the investigative interests of the authors. This work is innovative because the only other similar study in the literature investigates the perceptions of Indigenous media producers (Burrows 2018), and that study had different objectives.

Results

Perceptions of mainstream media coverage of Indigenous affairs

The first and the second interview questions investigate Indigenous journalists' perceptions of mainstream media coverage of Indigenous affairs:

1. In your opinion, in the non-Indigenous media, how Indigenous stories on environmental issues, in particular climate change, are treated [sic]?
2. How do you think Indigenous knowledge is, more in general, portrayed in mainstream media?

The first question was included because 80% of the planet's biodiversity is found in areas where Indigenous people live, and representatives of Indigenous communities sit at major international climate change tables, including the Arctic Council and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The contribution of Indigenous journalism to understanding climate change, in both the political and scientific context, is central (UNESCO, 2021). Indigenous journalism may provide not only new perspectives on climate change, it may also be more attuned than others to identifying colonialism perpetuated through institutions and the media. Further, Indigenous journalists can illustrate how Indigenous knowledge informs climate change adaptation strategies (Callison, 2019). Communicating climate change should ideally include a range of academic methods and traditions, such as listening to the voices of those whose lives are affected by climate change and encouraging climate communicators and scholars to establish dialogic relationships to provide and receive knowledge in a reciprocal way (Parregaard, 2019).

The second question expands the first question to a wider domain. Just over half (11/20) of the interviewees stated they were not satisfied with how Indigenous knowledge is portrayed in mainstream media, and 40% (8/20) stated that Indigenous affairs are not sufficiently covered in the mainstream media. “[Mainstream journalists] are not aware [of] the Indigenous people's issues, they are biased against the Indigenous peoples' issues. They are actually controlled by the commerce and interests of the publishers,” an Indigenous journalist from United States stated.

Only one Indigenous journalist from New Zealand declared themselves satisfied with the coverage of Indigenous affairs in mainstream media. She stated, “The situation has improved a lot in the last years, I think it is getting better and better also in the future.”

An important issue revealed by the interviews is the perception that mainstream journalists lack connection to Indigenous communities. A journalist from India stated: “In terms of reporting about climate change in Indigenous communities, ...it's problematic in a way that most of it is helicopter reporting. They just drop into a place and claim to know everything and share that story.”

Interviewees felt that mainstream journalists do not understand the connection between Indigenous people and the environment. For example, an Indigenous journalist from Canada stated:

There is a lack of understanding of our relationship to our land, to the water, to our spaces because land and natural resources are treated like a commodity by [the] mainstream world, not just media, but also [corporations]. We see ourselves as caretakers of these precious resources. It has to be passed down through the generations, so it needs to be nurtured and needs to be maintained rather than being exploited.

Interviewees felt that mainstream media portrays Indigenous peoples as victims who lack resilience, rather than understanding the equilibrium between Indigenous people and the environment. An Indigenous journalist from Nepal stated:

I think that indigenous stories in non-Indigenous outlets are often stories of victimization, ...especially with climate change, mostly with climate change. [There are] stories of Indigenous people losing their language, losing their culture, losing their way of life because the environment around them is changing. And it's not stories of empowerment or adaptability or resilience. These words are associated with Indigenous people. Indigenous people have been adapting since the beginning of time to the changing world around them, and it's no different now.

It is important to clarify the disparities between western knowledge and Indigenous knowledges and how they are reflected in mainstream media. Efforts to bridge the gap between scientific research and Indigenous knowledges tend to be directed by the terms of science, focusing on documenting facts and observations to close deficits in scientific understanding. The more complex aspects of Indigenous knowledges rooted in Indigenous worldviews and belief systems are often overlooked, and where Indigenous

knowledges and modern science contradict each other, it is often assumed that science is correct. Research in the Arctic embodies these conflicts, even as the importance of Indigenous knowledges is probably recognised there more than in any other region globally (Ford as cited in Moraca, 2019). The Indigenous journalists interviewed felt that prejudices and misrepresentations are central to mainstream media portrayals of Indigenous knowledges. One Indigenous journalist from Norway said Indigenous knowledges are treated as something “mystical, magical, far from western science”, specifying that “western scientists organize this hierarchical order, ... that [western science is] the most valid, and then there's indigenous knowledge and how indigenous knowledge is treated in the western media.”

One Indigenous journalist from the United States with a sister and father who work as scientists is familiar with both systems of knowledge:

It's not really viewed as something data-driven and it's true its anecdotal, but that doesn't mean that is anything less valuable than numbers and data. Yet indigenous science is essential to understand what western science alone cannot overcome today, namely the increasingly sudden and violent climatic upheavals, to which numbers and historical series sometimes cannot give an explanation.

Three interviewees felt younger generations are reacting to this lack of media coverage or incorrect media coverage by creating their own opportunities. An Indigenous journalist from Mexico explained: “Thanks to social media, we have a growing number of indigenous people that decide to report online on their own community.” Indigenous communities are more engaged by this approach because it is more authentic and reflects their values (Tsai et al. 2020).

One limit to accurate mainstream media coverage of Indigenous knowledges is the difficulty of sharing aspects of culture that are embedded in Indigenous languages. An Indigenous journalist from Canada stated:

I have to recognize that sometimes the sensitivity and the understanding that some knowledge in certain communities shouldn't be shared [is related to] the fact that language is not a common thing. Also, often language is not always written down in particular communities or is only spoken [among] people who are in that community, so people won't tell me certain things. I won't share certain things. We all have this level of understanding about how we share our culture, and a lot of that is a direct response to colonialism. Because when we did share our culture, when colonial settlers first arrived here, it was used against us. It was used to target us and to kill us.

One of the interviewees is on the board of the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) and explained how the association should intervene when mainstream media provides poor-quality coverage of issues related to Indigenous peoples and knowledges. A recent example is when former US senator and former CNN senior political commentator Rick Santorum spoke at the Young America's Foundation Standing Up for

Faith & Freedom Conference and stated, “We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes we have Native Americans, but candidly, there isn’t much Native American culture in American culture” (NBC news, 2012, para. 4). NAJA successfully called on CNN to dismiss Santorum from his position immediately.

According to half of the interviewees, mainstream media portrayals of Indigenous communities, traditions and Indigenous knowledges are insufficiently complex and minimise differences between communities. One Indigenous journalist from the United States explained:

I think the mainstream media coverage of indigenous cultures and people is really sort of bland and broad. There's not a lot of distinguishing between tribes and their different lifestyles and cultures and things of that nature. In terms of modern Indigenous people, how they're discussed in the media, or mainstream media, I think a lot of it is just about negative issues. But there's not really a celebration of the culture or stories or people from the culture. I think the only time you really see that is when it's Indigenous People's Day or around Thanksgiving, where it's sort of the time to show your support for these people. But I'd like to see more longform and investigative [pieces] or projects on Indigenous people done by Indigenous people, or at least people that are very studied and educated on their cultures and their differences.

This phenomenon just described has been called ‘the sign of the plural’ and characterises narratives about ethnic minorities, gender representations and people with mental health problems. The phenomenon creates generalisations of characteristics, attitudes or actions, usually negative, creating a homogenisation that “creates statements of truth that prescribe and bind aspects of people's identity” (Nairn et al. 2017, p. 45).

Discussion

Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists

The topic of mainstream journalists contacting Indigenous journalists for more information or as a form of preparation or education emerged numerous times. Likewise, the topic of Indigenous journalists comparing their experiences with mainstream journalists was a key discussion point. Around half the journalists had experience interacting with mainstream journalists, especially the younger journalists and those with international experience. One Indigenous journalist from Nepal described how talking to mainstream journalists who have collaborated with her led them to consider not only the end journalistic product, but also the journalistic process: “We should be behind the camera and part of the planning process and part of [everything] from the beginning, from [the] ground up. Otherwise, [it] is just like culture appropriation or exploitation or sensationalism or romanticism.”

One interviewee highlighted the difference between ‘storytellers’ and ‘story takers’, underlining the importance of the relationship between journalist and community, and the ethics that drive journalistic narratives. Several interviewees were sceptical about the possibility of fruitful collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous journalists. An

Indigenous journalist from Norway commented: "Even if we tell them, they actually are ignorant. They don't want to [hear] about our issues."

The experience of an Indigenous journalist from Kashmir explains how the mainstream media is populated mostly by non-Indigenous journalists, who belong to the highest castes and who are, therefore, culturally and socially very distant. They noted that: "In the region there were mainstream journalists who [did] not [come] from Indigenous communities. They are usually upper caste Hindus." An Indigenous journalist from India made similar comments: "If a journalist is from the upper caste his or her perspective on indigenous communities is biased."

Many interviewees felt there is a disconnect between the values of Indigenous journalists and mainstream journalists, preventing the two from fully understanding each other. One Indigenous journalist from Africa commented:

What is important for them? Why is it important for them? Because in the industrial world the idea is to expand and to make more money. But why are these Indigenous people resisting this? What is it? So, it's about trying to understand both parties, you have this industrial side, and then you have this Indigenous side, but it's very easy to understand the industrial world. But how much effort do the mainstream journalists put [in] when they are researching...the values of the Indigenous peoples' perspective?"

The difference in the value systems of mainstream journalists and 'alternative journalists' or non-mainstream media journalists, including Indigenous journalists, is often portrayed as a search for a balance between objectivity and contextualisation (Iskandar and el-Nawawy 2004). However, some alternative journalists reject standard forms of objectivity to separate themselves from mainstream media (Atton and Hamilton 2008; Forde 2011). Alternative journalists may be anchored in their own communities and their goal may be to build trust and credibility rather than to provide the neutral reporting of an impartial observer (Burrows, 2018).

The role of images and multimedia

The fourth interview question focuses on visual presentation and asks: How do you value on the iconographic part (photography, imaging, design) that accompanies article on indigenous affairs in the mainstream media [sic]?

Many interviewees underlined how photographic and multimedia stories from mainstream media are biased or prejudiced. Two interviewees used the term 'trauma porn' to describe mainstream photographic coverage dedicated to Indigenous peoples. The interviewees also emphasised the importance of the photographic process as well as the result. One Indigenous journalist from Mexico stated:

Non-indigenous peoples in non-Indigenous media [take] photographs without [gett]ing consent and that is actually a violation of Indigenous people's rights, that is [a] violation of Indigenous people's intellectual property rights. Whenever they carry or they publish photographs, [they] have to be careful with whether they have obtained the permissions from [a] particular indigenous community or not. And it happens so often that they really don't care at all about this process."

There is a significant difference between journalists who have longstanding relationships with Indigenous people and manage to establish a direct and authentic connection with the population and reporters who only come for a limited period, perhaps because of a specific event. Often, on these occasions, journalists go to great lengths to obtain photos of particularly photogenic Indigenous children without seeking permission for the images that paint the community as dysfunctional (McCallun et al. 2012). Despite this, all of the respondents recognised the growing importance of images and multimedia, especially for social media posts, because they provide democratic access to otherwise unreachable audiences. However, many pointed out that images and videos posted by Indigenous people on social media are at risk of being used unethically and without context by journalists who, as an Indigenous journalist from Sweden stated, "do not pay attention to an ethical information process".

Journalism ethics are just as central to photojournalism as they are to written journalism for the Indigenous journalists interviewed, with most of them stating that mainstream journalism often lacks this focus due to a lack of financial resources and time, or racism. For example, an Indigenous journalist from the United States explained:

Behind every camera you have a person, and this person must have an ethics and a responsibility. Everyone has a different view of the world from behind that camera. Then we have to see how traditional media uses this image. Many times, an image can say a lot; other times, it can contribute to prevaricat[ion]. I think it is very important to understand what the photographer wants to share with the subject of his image, what goals he has. [For] some Indigenous peoples, it is not possible to take pictures in certain situations. [Photographing] a person violates the rules of the community. [The photographer] will lose credibility and trust, and certainly his work cannot be qualified as ethical."

Conclusion

This study aligns with the perceptions of Indigenous journalists already present in the literature (see for example Burrows 2018). Mainstream journalism's coverage of Indigenous affairs is perceived by Indigenous authors as often prejudiced and biased, factually inaccurate, and as a misinterpretation of Indigenous culture and events both in its product and its process. It is precisely in the journalistic process, the interviewees stressed, that the ethics of the journalist reside, and high-quality journalism can only come from an ethical process. A quality product is not sensational, they stated, but respectful and attentive to the relationships between people and their socio-cultural context.

Despite their criticism of the current situation, the respondents were optimistic about the future of Indigenous journalism as they see the number of Indigenous media outlets and Indigenous affairs desks increasing in the mainstream media. Many of them recognise that Indigenous journalism will be fundamental in the context of climate change and hope that the values approach of Indigenous journalism can also reach large media outlets. One Indigenous journalist from the United States stated: "I think that there has to be an openness or collaboration for these stories to be told well and told truthfully from the Indigenous perspective. I think that it means [more]

Indigenous people becoming...journalists themselves and then also writing for these publications that are more widespread - the Guardian, for example - that people would read all over the world.”

Half of the journalists interviewed talked about possible solutions. An Indigenous Scandinavian radio journalist described a diversity program that invites Indigenous journalists to include their own perspectives when collaborating with non-Indigenous journalists. Such programs may be more successful in large networks than in small newspapers or radio stations. Another example is a pilot project at the University of Queensland School of Journalism in 2009 (Stewart et al. 2009) that brought students to meet Indigenous communities directly to collect information and first-hand testimonies, and to observe with their own eyes. The success of the project, despite its small scale, may encourage periods of ‘coaching and training’ between mainstream journalists and Indigenous communities and journalists. Some interviewees suggested creating fellowships to help mainstream media learn more about Indigenous cultures.

The two contexts, Indigenous journalism and mainstream journalism, are currently separated, and there are few channels of communication between them. These solutions may be valuable tools for starting to change the current status quo. However, these solutions can only be enacted if both parties are willing and if sufficient time and economic resources are available. Future research should involve further qualitative work, perhaps with a larger number of journalists from a larger number of countries, including journalists working in the climate field. Considering the perspectives of mainstream journalists may also provide further context (Chibuwe and Salawu 2020).

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. The fact that the study is being conducted by a non-indigenous researcher on an audience of indigenous journalists poses clear bias. Different but equally important biases would arise if the researcher were indigenous, obviously profoundly similar or different cultural contexts affect the way in which information is received and processed. The number of interviews conducted is not very high, but this study represents one of the few in this area and can therefore be considered a pilot for others, possible insights. Some areas of the world, including Australia and New Zealand, which are very important for the presence of indigenous journalism are underrepresented in this study, but other studies are available on those geographic areas.

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