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# Framing Disaster: News Media Coverage of Environmental Justice

Ellen E. Moore

*University of Washington Tacoma*, [melle@uw.edu](mailto:melle@uw.edu)

Kylie R. Lanthorn

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### Abstract

This research assesses news media coverage of two environmental justice cases involving Native American groups in Washington State. Through inductive framing analysis, this work evaluates the way in which commercial news media covered centuries-old environmental inequality faced by the Quileute Tribe and the Lower Elwha Klallam people. Both of these groups were thrust into fame for different reasons: The Quileute were identified in the *Twilight* film franchise, while the Lower Elwha Klallam people were associated with the largest dam removal project in the world. This research reveals that, while some progress has been made in the quality of news coverage of Indigenous environmental justice issues, absence of coverage remains an issue that continuously needs to be challenged.

*Keywords:* environmental justice, framing, journalism, Native Americans, Indigenous Groups, media coverage

Framing Disaster: News Media Coverage of  
Two Native American Environmental Justice Cases

According to Bullard (1996), *environmental justice* “embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations” (p. 493). Questions of legality aside, environmental justice involves deep questions about value, especially in regards to “who or what is important enough to deserve justice or fair treatment” (Stern & Dietz, 1994, p. 65). In assessing news media coverage of environmental issues experienced by the Quileute and the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribes, this research begins to address the shortage of scholarly attention (most recently noted by Vickery & Hunter, 2015) given to Native Americans’ unique environmental concerns. Through framing analysis, this work evaluates the way in which commercial news media approach environmental justice cases, including the amount of attention given to the issues, how the problems are defined and diagnosed, and how often the perspectives of the Tribes are included.

The importance of considering the complex interconnection of Indigenous groups, environmental justice, and news media is underscored by the recent national and international attention paid to representational politics of Native Americans. In 2015, three events are of note: California became the first state to ban any public school from using the name “Redskin” to refer to any team or mascot (Mason, 2015); Indigenous groups in California protested Pope Francis’ decision to canonize Junipero Serra (a man who many Tribes see as a perpetrator of mass violence) (Poggioli, 2015); and the state of Alaska renamed Columbus Day as “Indigenous People’s Day” (Begley, 2015).<sup>1</sup> All of these issues have been deemed newsworthy enough by the mainstream media to garner local, national, and international attention, in part because many

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<sup>1</sup> Alaska follows Hawaii, Oregon, and South Dakota in renaming Columbus Day.

Native American groups are actively fighting inequality and misrepresentation at an unprecedented level in many different arenas –with increasing degrees of success. Just why they feel they must do this is equally clear: continuing inequality on myriad levels, including economic, cultural, political, and environmental. This research addresses these struggles through analysis of mediated representations of two Native American groups’ different fights for environmental equality. It also highlights the need for sufficient attention to be paid to Indigenous groups by the news media so that their environmental justice issues can gain prominence in order to be addressed and resolved. Before doing so, it is important to contextualize these two cases through a description of contemporary representational politics in the United States

### **Native Americans, U.S. Popular Culture, and the News Media**

Native Americans and U.S. commercial popular culture have had what can be described as a complex and contentious relationship – one that is marked by unequal power and misrepresentations. Anyone not convinced of this need look no further than the spate of recent controversies with prominent companies, including: the Victoria’s Secret’s 2013 televised runway show, where an “angel” walked down the runway wearing high heels, lingerie with turquoise stones, and a feathered headdress (Li, 2012); Ralph Lauren’s use of old photographs depicting Native Americans to help sell their fall 2014 line of clothing in what was criticized as a “genocide aesthetic” (Chumley, 2014); and Paul Frank’s promotional “powwow” night, complete with plastic headdresses, tomahawks, and drinks called “Rain Dance Refresher” (Sieczkowski, 2012). Merskin (2014) observes that “this identity theft is common in American culture, particularly in the naming of products and the creating of brands, logos, and advertising” (p. 186), similar to what Keene (2015) refers to as “Native Appropriations” (p. 105).

In the realm of Hollywood, there have been similar controversies. Disney caused a stir when it cast white actor Johnny Depp as Tonto in the production of *Lone Ranger* in 2013, with critics decrying both the use of a white actor in a Native American role as well as the specific portrayal of the character: a mystic who speaks broken English. In 2015, Disney again caused a stir by casting white actor Rooney Mara in the role of *Pan*'s "Tiger Lily," a Native American character (Bui, 2015). Earlier in 2015, twelve Native American actors walked off the set of *The Ridiculous Six* (a Netflix-produced film starring Adam Sandler) due to depictions of "Native Americans as dirty, animalistic backdrops" (Young, 2015). None of these incidents are particularly revelatory, as Hollywood has long struggled with fairness in representations of different nationalities and ethnicities; however, these controversies reveal the difficulties Native Americans continue to face with contemporary representations by the culture industry.

When it comes to news media representations, Native Americans fare roughly the same. Weston (1996) argues that

Indians have been patronized, romanticized, stereotyped, and ignored by most of mainstream America. The twentieth-century press has been complicit in this, seldom by design but certainly through the exercise of its conventions and values... The very conventions and practices of journalism have worked to reinforce... popular imagery" (p. 164).

Speaking directly to lack of news coverage, Alia (2004) argues that the news media often treat members of Indigenous groups as "un-people" - that is, unimportant and therefore unworthy of coverage. Some of this absence of media attention is, in part, due to the U.S. news media system being slow to recognize or support Indigenous-produced media (Alia, 2006). As a result, there are few Native American journalists writing for mainstream news outlets: As recently as

2015, the president of the *Native American Journalists Association* (NAJA) called for U.S. news media firms to hire more Native American journalists. While the *Nieman Reports* (a part of Harvard's "Foundation for Journalism") recognized the significant paucity of Indigenous journalists, the reason provided for why more of them should be hired is worth noting:

We don't have a lot of Native American journalists at mainstream newspapers, and that's a problem, especially because we may not be that large in number but the jurisdictional and economic power of tribes is so significant (Nieman Reports, 2015).

While it is true that the power of various Indigenous groups should be recognized and proportionately represented, this research contends that it is important to recognize the other counterpart of power: that of mediated representations themselves. When Native American environmental justice cases are ignored by the corporate news media, they consequently receive very little public attention, which in turn means that these cases will continue unaddressed and unmitigated. The inclusion of more Indigenous voices to mainstream news stories would address the current problems in news media coverage in three interrelated ways, specifically by: adding more diverse voices to counterbalance the White, largely patriarchal perspective (as recognized by Benson, 2005) for all news stories; helping to bring more visibility to problems faced in Indigenous communities; and, ultimately, fostering positive change through greater recognition of these problems.

Writing in *The Quill*, Tallent (2013) warns against images and words in the news media that perpetuate stereotypes of Native Americans as animalistic, mythical, or untrustworthy. Weston (1996) observes that news stories have tended to reinforce Native American stereotypes involving alcoholism and poverty, have stereotyped and sensationalized them when reporting

conflicts, and have treated them as though they were living in the past. The news media also fall short when it comes to context: Christians et al. (2011) and Loew (2012) call attention to the fact that journalism has failed to provide context that would help readers comprehend Native American history and culture, especially when it comes to reporting on conflict. In addition, Klyde-Silverstein (2012) identifies a paradox in news reporting of Indigenous peoples, recognizing that “American Indians face a perplexing conundrum: The media refuse to acknowledge their issues until they are ‘newsworthy,’ yet Indian-related mascots and team names remain in the news every day” (p. 125, citing Rosenstein, 2001).

### **Environmental Justice Cases, “Un-People,” and the News Media**

Noted above, research has revealed that Indigenous people are often ignored or stereotyped by the commercial news media in the United States. This then begs the question of how the news media cover the complex intersection of Native American rights and environmental issues. Rosen (1994) claims that environmental justice issues generally receive sparse and sporadic attention in the mainstream news media, a trend of exclusion acknowledged in other research (eg, Klyde-Silverstein, 2012; Heinz, 2005; Bullard, 1996). Heinz (2005) in particular contends that when the news media *do* cover environmental justice issues, the problems are often sensationalized by the mainstream news media, and the people suffering from environmental inequality are often stereotyped or marginalized.

Environmental justice cases began to attract attention in the United States in the early 1980s when civil rights groups organized to block the government of North Carolina from dumping hundreds of millions of pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls in a toxic landfill in Warren County, an area with the highest percentage of African Americans in the state (Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009). Although African-Americans and Native Americans were able to

organize large and effective protests around the issue, Heinz (2005) argues that in many other cases (she cites a 1991 train car derailment in poor North Richmond that filled the air with sulfuric acid) environmental disasters receive little news attention unless they impact a White, higher-income neighborhood.

This research would not be complete without recognition of the ongoing (at the time of this writing) struggle by numerous Native American groups near the Standing Rock Native American Reservation in North Dakota against Energy Transfer Partners, the corporation behind the Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline is meant to transport crude oil from northern North Dakota to southern Illinois on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Many activists (both Native American and non-Indigenous) have identified the pipeline route placement as a modern example of environmental racism because the original route (crossing the Missouri River north of Bismarck, North Dakota) was changed when concerns arose about potential contamination of Bismarck citizens' water supply (Dalrymple, 2016). As a result of these fears, Energy Transfer Partners rerouted the pipeline downstream from Bismarck but directly upstream from the Standing Rock reservation. In addition, the pipeline disturbs land considered sacred (including burial grounds) by the local Lakota Sioux Tribe. In an ABC news piece, Thorbecke (2016) cites Dave Archambault II, chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, as asserting that "This pipeline was rerouted towards our tribal nations when other citizens of North Dakota rightfully rejected it in the interests of protecting their communities and water. We seek the same consideration as those citizens."

Of particular note for this research is the distinct, recognizable arc of coverage by corporate news outlets during the period of Indigenous struggle over this issue. Prior to September 2016, the mainstream news media largely had ignored Indigenous struggles over the



pipeline. This media blackout continued until early September 2016, when independent journalist and activist Amy Goodman posted a “web exclusive” on independent news media outlet *Democracy Now!* showing Indigenous protesters being maced, punched, and attacked by dogs. Internet audiences around the world saw pipeline security guard dogs with blood dripping from their mouths and protesters’ faces swollen from tear gas attacks. As Goodman later remarked on the Tavis Smiley Show, mainstream news largely had ignored the pipeline protests until she released her video to shocked news audiences around the world: “We published it on... Labor Day weekend and it went viral: more than 13 million hits. And every network - NPR, CNN, CBS, NBC - all over the world... started running the bloody dogs, and showing the dogs biting the protesters” (Smiley, 2016).

Summing up the observations about how commercial news cover social and environmental justice issues, Smiley noted “Mainstream media... have all the resources, they have all the staff, they have all the money...and yet so often they are late to these stories.” As Tapahe (2016) observes, mainstream news media often show up late and then provide “unbelievably one-sided” coverage. She cites the example of local videos showing Indigenous protesters “being doused by a water cannon in sub-degree temperatures” while outlets like NBC and CBS were relying solely on local sheriff’s department press releases claiming that water was only being used to douse fires. The troubling reliance on official sources aside, would commercial news media be covering this at all if not for social media and independent news agencies like *Democracy Now!* with boots on the ground to provide viral videos of violence to shock them into action? Unfortunately, the Dakota Access Pipeline struggles provide a modern

instantiation of inaccurate and misleading news coverage when it comes to Indigenous environmental and human rights' struggles<sup>2</sup>.

This pattern in environmental justice coverage has a deeper origin in the complex intersection of diversity and commercial journalism specifically: The argument that “race and diversity... have been under-covered or often written about in simplistic, stereotyped ways” (Benson, 2005, p. 14) points to an economic undergirding of the commercial journalism industry, where environmental issues involving poor people of color often get pushed to the side. These trends, perhaps needless to say, are not limited to the United States; in his analysis of framing of climate change by UK news media, Boykoff (2008) found that issues relating to climate justice were rarely included.

### **A Case for Native Americans' Unique Environmental Concerns**

Native Americans' environmental justice concerns often fall outside typical considerations of environmental inequality. Heinz (2005) defines environmental racism as “the placement of health-threatening structures such as landfills and factories near or in areas where the poor and ethnic minorities frequently live” (pp. 47-48). Other scholars supply similar definitions: In particular, Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts (2009) contend that “ethnic minorities, indigenous persons, people of color, and low-income communities confront a higher burden of environmental exposure from air, water, and soil pollution from industrialization, militarization, and consumer practices” (p. 406). One can certainly consider some Native Americans' environmental concerns in that light – especially in regards to the pressure on tribes (several of whom live near uranium mines, nuclear testing sites, or toxic waste disposal areas) to accept

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<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the pipeline was approved by the new Trump administration through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and was completed in early 2017.

different forms of hazardous waste on their lands, including nuclear waste (Scientific American, 2010; Taliman, 1992b; Allen, 1987)<sup>3</sup>.

Although traditional conceptions of environmental racism can and do apply to Native American groups, Vickery and Hunter (2015) make the compelling argument that environmental problems often are unique for Native Americans: “common (environmental justice) measures reflecting... distance to hazardous facilities do not capture the complexity of Native American connections to landscape” (p. 3). Part of the reason for this, Harris and Harper (2011) argue, is that many indigenous groups consider their own history and culture to be integrally connected to a specific *ethno-habitat*. A good example of this land-culture connection comes from many Native American groups in the Pacific Northwest. As one member of a local Tribe noted to one of my (E. Moore’s) students: “The history of the Tribe *is* the history of salmon.” Endres (2012) notes that the conflict between Native American groups and the U.S. federal government over the Yucca Mountain nuclear storage facility has at its core a different way of viewing the land: The various Tribes view the land as *sacred*, whereas the government sees it as a place of *sacrifice*. Understanding relationships (including those with the land) is essential when considering Indigenous identity and, thus, environmental justice cases (Keene, 2015). The complex relationship between natural resources and cultural identity, means that “sacred attributes associated with... features of the physical landscape [can be] cultural mnemonics tied to specific events, stories, culture, instructions in ethical behavior, and religious practices” (Harris & Harper, p. 233). Given the fact that from the 1600s to the 1900s, Native Americans lost the majority of their land due to increasingly unequal power struggles (Banner, 2007, p. 4), it

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<sup>3</sup> Endres (2012) refers to the practice of the federal government to pressure Native American groups to store nuclear waste at places like Yucca Mountain as “nuclear colonialism” (p. 329)

is clear that the issue of land and resources becomes woven into both historical and contemporary environmental justice considerations.

The case studies providing the focal point of this research fall within both the commonly-accepted definitions of environmental racism as well as those unique to Native American Tribes. In one case, a Tribe has been denied access to land and resources directly associated with their culture, religion, and livelihood; for another, the direct threat from a tsunami looms. For both Tribes, a question of rights when it comes to the land is key.

### **Background and Case Studies**

#### **Elwha Dam Construction and Removal: the Impact on the Lower Elwha Klallam People**

As Boyd (in Crane, 2011, p. 17) observes, “The story of the Elwha River begins with the Klallam people.” The Elwha River runs for 45 miles through the northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula in the Pacific Northwest, emptying in the Strait of Juan de Fuca (Nijhuis, 2014). Prior to the dam construction in the early 1900s, the Elwha had a reputation as “one of the most productive rivers in the Pacific Northwest,” providing a spawning ground for five types of Pacific salmon, steelhead, and sea-run cutthroats (Crane, 2011, p. 9). Thomas Aldwell, described as “an idealist of the industrial capitalist stripe” from Canada, wanted to build a hydroelectric dam to provide power to the nearby city of Port Angeles, and so petitioned for capital to build a dam to block the flow of the Elwha (Crane, 2011, p. 41). While Aldwell made initial note of the Lower Elwha Klallam people living near the dam, once construction began in 1910 he never mentioned them again (Crane, 2011), even though they protested the project throughout construction.

There are several sources that provide a glimpse of what happened to the members of the tribe during this time. In *Elwha: a River Reborn*, Mapes (2013) writes that the Lower Elwha

Klallam Tribe were the “first people” of the watershed, and that it was they who lost the most - culturally, spiritually, and environmentally - when the dam was built. The specific losses Mapes identifies is that “when Elwha Dam was built, its floodwaters inundated the tribe’s sacred creation site upstream, as well as its largest inland village site, and lands up and down both sides of the river used by tribal members for centuries” (p. 182). Crane (2011) recognizes other types of damage, specifically that Tribal families were geographically splintered due to “the twin pressures of American settlement and capitalist development” (p. 35). In addition, the tribe also lost a very specific cultural and economic resource: salmon. “For millennia, the Elwha River’s...fish populations had provided for the sustenance needs of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. The fish populations on which (they) depended were devastated...with the construction of the Elwha Dam (Burch, 2007, p. 83).

In 1992, the U.S. government mandated removal of the dam through the *Elwha River Ecosystem and Fisheries Restoration Act*. The legislation stated that decisions should be made regarding transfer of land “to the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe in trust for tribal housing, cultural, or economic development purposes.” Dam removal did not begin until 2011 and was completed in 2014. When demolition started, members of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe were there as they were in 1910 when construction began, but for a different reason: to celebrate the removal and wait for the return of their land, and the salmon that used to run through the river. Members of the Tribe also were there when the large rock associated with their “creation site” was uncovered after a century (Associated Press, 2014).

### **Trapped in a Tsunami Zone: the Quileute Tribe**

Unlike the story of the Elwha Dam, there is not much information available about the history of the small Quileute tribe. What is known is that “in 1855, the Tribe signed a treaty

ceding thousands of square miles of land in exchange for fishing and hunting rights,” which placed them in a small one square mile area right on the shore (Campbell & de Melker, 2012).

According to the Quileute, they were coerced into ceding their land under false pretenses:

After unsuccessfully trying to convince the Quileute to move to the Quinault Reservation, the United States created the Quileute Indian Reservation at the mouth of the Quillayute River. Some lands designated for inclusion in the reservation were never transferred, so the ultimate size of the reservation was one square mile, bordered on two sides by water. The dangers created by the reservation’s location became increasingly evident over time. When the Tribe could move freely about their original lands, their people could avoid the threats from coastal storms and river floods. Once the Tribe was restricted to a low-lying coastal area at the mouth of the river, the seeds were planted for future disaster (Bailey & Kennedy, 2012, p. 4).

As a result of the relocation, the Quileute lived and worked on an infinitesimal coastal reservation that included housing, recreational facilities, and a schoolyard. With rough storms and the constant threat of a tsunami, the Quileute were constantly at risk from the water – both the adjacent river and the sea – that surrounded them (Campbell & de Melker, 2012). Rice (2015) notes that the small Tribe had fought for decades to regain land farther inland and at a higher elevation due to the danger from a tsunami or flooding of the nearby Quillayute River without success. The twin threats of flooding and/or tsunami that endangered the Quileute mark this clearly as an environmental justice case.

In late 2008, however, two events occurred that proved crucial for publicizing the Tribe’s concerns. The first installment of the *Twilight* film series hit movie screens, and the resulting popularity thrust the Quileute temporarily into the spotlight. In the film, the Quileute are

identified by name, but their legends are distorted: while Tribal myth holds that Tribe members are originally descended from wolves, in the film series, the Tribal members are said to change into “werewolves” when angered. Actor Taylor Lautner, who is not of Native American origin but plays a Quileute in the film, learned of the Tribe’s public safety plight from the Quileute themselves and began to use his newfound popularity to lobby on their behalf. Then, in 2011, a tsunami hit the Japanese coast: news media coverage of the disaster, with the high property damage and loss of life, brought the Tribe back into the spotlight and underscored the urgency to protect the Tribe’s safety. Ultimately, President Obama signed the *Quileute Tribe Tsunami and Flood Protection Act* in 2012 (Bailey & Kennedy, 2012), enabling the tribe to move out of the danger zone through the transfer of 785 acres of property inland (Rice, 2015).

### **Interpretive Framework for Research: Method and Theory**

The two cases of environmental justice in Washington State were chosen in part because of their prominence: The Quileute were thrust into the national spotlight because of the success of *Twilight* as well as the tsunami, and the Lower Elwha Klallam became associated with the world’s largest dam removal project. They also were chosen because they provide clear instantiations of the unique nature of Native Americans environmental concerns. Together, they provide an example of how mainstream news media cover different environmental justice issues.

Several ‘historical news’ databases were consulted, including Chronicling America: Washington, Historic Washington Newspapers, Seattle Times, and Washington Post 1877-1997. Databases of current news were likewise searched, including LexisNexis, Ethnic Newswatch, ProQuest Newsstand, and Seattle Times. Although print journalism is the primary focus of this research, a small number of “TV news” articles also were included due to the relatively little coverage overall (this especially pertained to the Quileute struggle).

For each case we separated analysis of coverage into different time periods. For the Elwha, we divided media coverage analysis into three time periods: first, coverage on the initial building of the dam (1911-1914) (n= 6); second, articles covering the period when the dam was in place (n= 10), including the period surrounding the federal legislation mandating dam removal (1915-1998); and the ten-year period when plans began in earnest to deconstruct the dam (2004-2014) (n= 51).<sup>4</sup> For the Quileute, we analyzed media coverage (n= 12) after the *Twilight* book and movie series became popular (in 2006 and 2010-2014, respectively<sup>5</sup>). In total, 79 articles were analyzed. The start date for analysis of news coverage for the Quileute begins in 2006 because we found no coverage before that time period.

This research employs framing as a methodological and theoretical tool to analyze how news media covered these two environmental justice cases involving indigenous peoples. While there is some debate about framing (Lakoff, 2010; Scheufele, 1999), the utility of it for this research comes from recognition that frames “*define problems...diagnose causes...make moral judgments... and suggest remedies*” (Entman, 1993, p. 52, emphasis in original). Framing thus is useful in the sense outlined by Gitlin (1980) when he wrote that frames are “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation” that reveal “little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (p. 6). When it comes to media coverage of Native Americans’ environmental justice issues, these theories are revealed through identification of what is included as well as what is excluded, as news media can *avoid* defining problems through key silences (Entman, 1993).

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<sup>4</sup> We found no coverage of the Elwha dam from 1999 to 2003.

<sup>5</sup> We found no coverage of the Quileute between 2007 and 2009)



Framing analysis of news media coverage occurred *inductively*, where we examined the coverage to discern emergent patterns instead of looking for specific frames identified from previous framing scholarship. All articles that focused primarily on either the Elwha or Quileute tribes, the tsunami zone, or the dam removal project were included in the sample. Each article was analyzed for key words and phrases, building a list of frames which were the most numerous. The most common frame for the Elwha tribe was “Restoring Balance” (either cultural or environmental), indicated through language about returning the salmon habitat to its previous state, uncovering the tribal creation site, and in general righting a wrong committed when the dam was built. The most common frames for the Quileute were “Public Safety” and “Reaction” frames. “Public safety” frames included those articles that drew attention to the danger the tribe faced from living in a tsunami zone through tactics such as describing school buildings getting battered by storms. “Reaction” articles were seen as a response to attention gained from the *Twilight* film series, but more often to the 2011 Japanese tsunami, as that widely publicized tragedy was likened to the potential plight of the Quileute. Finally, the frame identified as “Omission” is relevant to coverage of both Tribes, as both sought for decades to be recognized as worthy of coverage by mainstream news media.

### **Analysis of News Media Coverage of Elwha and Quileute**

#### **Elwha**

**Media coverage during and directly after dam construction: 1911-1914.** Between 1911 and 1914 there were a scant six newspaper articles on construction of the Elwha Dam. All articles were from the *Seattle Times*, none of them had authors associated with them, and many were short (one was only four sentences). The central focus in all of the articles save one is what

we identified as a *Progress (Capitalism)* frame, where the sole emphasis is placed on economic benefit from dam construction. One article from early 1911 instantiates this frame well in its title alone: “Peninsula Thrilling under Promotion Boom: Cheap Power from Company established on Elwha River Has Given Impetus to Progress...” Another article published later the same year ecstatically confirms that the “Progress and Prosperity Body of Chamber of Committee Finds Evidence of Most Amazing Progress,” citing as the cause that the Elwha dam will produce 25,000 horsepower of electricity to help burgeoning development in the area. Another article notes that capitalist interests are “just awakening to vast resources of [the Olympic] district” due to the Elwha River now being successfully “harnessed for power.” One article expressed dismay when construction of the dam temporarily hit a setback, noting that capitalism’s march had been slowed. Crane (2011) notes that this “spirit of capitalism, so strong and unmitigated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, played a fundamental role in the construction of the Elwha dam” (p. 53).

Only one article out of the six focused on the environmental impact of the dam. In an article titled “Build Elwha Hatchery,” the author noted the detrimental impacts of the dam on the ability of fish to reproduce, and that Washington State law required “fish ways” so that fish could spawn upstream. Analysis of a particular perspective is hampered by the fact that the article is short (four sentences), but it is noteworthy that this was the only article where the health of the fish were considered.

The identified framing devices used in the media coverage are key to understanding how the problem at stake is being defined and what types of solutions are presented as needed. In the case of early coverage of the Elwha Dam construction, the project is framed largely as a positive economic boost to the area. However, most important for this analysis is that none of the six

articles mentioned the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe at all: not its protests of the dam construction or even to note that the Tribe's lands were being impacted. This absence is key, especially when considering Gitlin's (1980) discussion of news "selection" – which stories make it into the news, and which ones are excluded. In the case of media coverage of the Lower Elwha Klallam's plight, news media's silence becomes ideological, as breathless enthusiasm for unchecked capitalist expansion completely overshadows any other considerations, including cultural, economic, and environmental preservation related to the Tribe. This exclusion is perhaps not surprising as economic interests often outweigh concerns for environmental justice, revealing an underlying common sense which prioritizes capital. As a result, *Omission* - defined as the absence of coverage of all or part of a story involving environmental concerns for Indigenous groups, which can include absence of a Tribe's perspective, environmental concern, or even mention of the Tribe itself - is considered the primary frame for articles covering the first phase of media coverage of the dam.

**Media coverage with dam in place: including federal legislation (1915 to 1998).** Once the Elwha dam was in place and in use, there were ten newspaper articles related to dam issues. The majority of these (eight) displayed what our analysis identified as *Restoring Environmental Balance*, characterized by a focus on problems caused by the dam for the spawning fish and the benefits of restoration. One article from the *Seattle Times* in 1972 placed primary focus on a biologist's concern about the dam's impact on salmon runs. A second article (also *Seattle Times*) in 1978, while also voicing concern about the health of salmon populations, defined this problem through the voice of the Tribe, whose members refrained from fishing that year due to concerns about salmon numbers. Here, the Tribe is quoted directly, with members speaking of the importance of preserving tribal "tradition" by conserving salmon. This focus on the importance

on preserving the cultural traditions was named *Restoring Cultural Balance*. While both articles focused on salmon conservation, one did so through the lens of the Tribe, giving it a voice and providing acknowledgment of the tribe's cultural and spiritual connection to the fish.

The eight other articles from this period (all were from the 1990s) reflected anticipation of – and then reaction to – the government's decision to remove the dam. The majority of these exhibited the *Restoring Environmental Balance* frame, as indicated by titles such as “Righting a Clear Wrong,” “A Bid to Give a River Back to the Salmon,” and one that noted the environmental benefit of “chipping away” at “Harmful Dams.” To sum, while the majority of articles from this time frame displayed a *Restoring Environmental Balance* frame (characterized by a focus on the benefits of restoring the river back to its natural, pre-dam state), only one tied this environmental restoration to cultural rejuvenation of the tribe as well. As a result, our findings reveal that, for this period, *Omission* continued to be the primary frame.

**Media coverage directly before, during, and after dam removal: (2004 to 2014).** The most common frame discernible in newspaper coverage during this period was *Restoring Environmental Balance*. Articles with this frame (50 out of 51) decried the “salmon-killing dams” that “decimated the Elwha's rare five-species salmon runs” by “pummeling” them. They noted that the Elwha dam needed to be “sacrificed” for the health of the river and the salmon, and that “energy needs” should be balanced with that of “environmental protection.”

Once the dam was dismantled, the articles expressed joy at the “ecological recovery,” “revegetation plans,” and “a river restored to its natural beauty.” One particularly good example of the environmental restoration theme was evident in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, which noted the benefits of salmon's renewal: “[Their] return, scientists say, will allow the creatures that flourish on salmon — the bears, eagles, otters and orcas that also call this region home — to

experience rejuvenations of their own.” The environmental restoration perspective was evident in the titles of articles as well. Arguing for the need to have the Elwha restored, the *Seattle Times* titled one article “Righting a Clear Wrong” while a Reuter’s article claimed “Salmon revival in sight as Elwha River dams fall in US Northwest.”

Although *Omission* was the primary frame for news coverage of the Lower Elwha Klallam people from the early 1900s to the late 1990s, analysis of the “dam removal” phase makes it clear that the news media were paying more attention to the Tribe decades later. The *Restoring Cultural Balance* frame (visible in 16 of the 51 articles from this time frame), placed emphasis on the cultural benefits of restoring land, the river, and the fish to the lives of Tribal members. Of these, 13 articles used direct quotes from tribal members to gain their perspective. Articles that chose to focus on the cultural restoration taking place with the dam removal noted that the lowering water levels were exposing ground sacred to the tribe. A *Tacoma News Tribune* article wrote that although the tribe had been fighting the dam since its original construction a century prior, now the Tribe could begin to regain both land and practices relating to salmon.

All of the articles that focused on cultural restoration also emphasized environmental renewal. In “Elwha Restoration: Bringing Back Habitats and Culture,” the *Kitsap Sun* noted the close connection between environmental and cultural restoration: “With a culture based on salmon, shellfish and game, tribal members have yearned to restore the natural habitats in and along the Elwha River.” A *Seattle Times* article quoted tribal member Jamie Valadez as saying: “I’m just so happy. An injustice was done 100 years ago. And now here is a chance to heal not only the fish, but the whole watershed, and the people.” Thus, in the articles that focused on *both* environmental and cultural restoration, the connection between the health of the tribe and the health of the salmon is made clear.

One interesting trend discovered during analysis occurred when there was a conflict about hatchery salmon that the Tribe had released into the river. Environmentalists sued the Tribe, which ran the hatchery, for releasing tens of thousands of hatchery fish. Interestingly, in all the articles that contained this conflict frame (environmentalists versus the tribe), the tribe is never quoted. While it is possible that the Tribe was not quoted because of the care taken with news media during any legal issue, none of the articles noted that they tried to contact the Tribe.

### **Quileute**

**Pre-*Twilight* and Tsunami (2006).** The first finding of analysis is that there was no news media coverage of the Quileute Tribe's efforts to get out of the tsunami zone prior to 2006. This is especially striking given that the Tribe had been attempting to move out of the coastal area for more than a century. As in the case with the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, then, *Omission* (at least until 2006), remains a key frame. In 2006, there were two newspaper articles written about the tribe's plight. The first *Twilight* book had come out in 2005 but this does not appear to have precipitated any coverage, as the series is not mentioned in either of the two articles.

The first piece from this period was from the *New York Times* and revealed what we identified as a *Minimization* and a *Mystical Indian* frame. Minimization of the tribe's plight was evident when the journalist noted that, although the Quileute were actively trying to move out of the tsunami zone, it was "unlikely" that a tsunami would endanger them. More troubling was the language about the Quileute's push to get out of danger: The article notes that after the Quileute tried unsuccessfully to draw attention to their plight, "they launched a two-pronged, modern-day assault.... then the Quileute took a hostage: the parking lot of an exquisite beach in Olympic National Park." Here, the article refers to the decision made by the Quileute to block public access to a popular beach, but does so in a language that evokes the "Indians on the warpath"

trope identified by Loew (2012). More subtly, the article noted that the Tribe wanted to “swap” land with the National Park Service, language that seemed to evoke an earlier time when various Native American groups would exchange land with the U.S. government. The article then mentioned that the Quileute believe they are descended from wolves, even though their origin story had nothing to do with their desire for safety. These stereotypical portrayals all evoked the *Mystical Indian* frame, where the language suggests that the Tribe is primitive, violent, or simply anachronistic. This portrayal was reinforced by the fact that there were very few quotes from Tribe members, and thus their perspective was often missing.

An *Associated Press* article also from 2012 covers the same protest (blocking public access to the beach) by the Quileute, but frames the Tribe’s actions differently. First, the issue was framed as a “public safety” priority, with the article noting that “the same ocean that crashes on these beaches could roll ashore and sweep away the tribe's lower village in a tsunami.” Reinforcing the *Public Safety* frame, the Quileute perspective was gained through multiple quotes from Tribal members throughout the article that revealed their fears about Tribal members’ safety. The *AP* article did not mention the Quileute origin myth regarding their connection to wolves.

**Tsunami and *Twilight* period (2010-2014).** The first observation is that there were more articles (13) in this time period about the Quileutes’ attempt to relocate, with the majority (11) in the years directly after the Japanese tsunami (2011-2012).<sup>6</sup> All articles during this time contained the *Public Safety* frame, where journalists placed primary emphasis on the safety of the tribe and the resulting need to move them out of the tsunami zone as quickly as possible. This was indicated by very specific language used in the articles, including that the Quileute children were

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<sup>6</sup> Four of these were local TV news articles

in “grave danger” from a “killer tsunami” and could be “wiped out.” One article noted that heavy logs would “assault” the playground during winter storms, while another noted the serious “threat” of rising waters. The tone of the coverage revealed that news media found this issue to be pressing, worthy of coverage, and thus deserving of action from the government.

Alongside this unanimous call for safety for the tribe was a perspective we identified as *Reaction – Japanese Tsunami*. This was the second most common frame, with seven articles from 2011 to 2012 noting that the devastating effects of the tsunami in Japan could easily be seen in Washington State with the Quileute if no action was taken to move them out of the danger zone. One article noted that “The tsunami in Japan painted a picture of what can happen on our coast,” while another argued that “images from last year's Japanese tsunami helped galvanize support in Congress.” Taken in conjunction with the *Public Safety* frame, the *Reaction – Japanese Tsunami* frame revealed strong support in the articles for the tribe’s desire to be relocated. These positive frames were reinforced by the frequency (six) with which the tribe was directly quoted. When the story was about senators (including Norm Dicks and Maria Cantwell), those articles tended to quote those official sources rather than the tribe. Even then, the public safety message was the same: it was a matter of urgency that the tribe be moved.

With the *Public Safety* perspective, four of the eleven articles revealed a *Reaction – Twilight* frame, where the journalists acknowledged how the newfound popularity of Twilight lent some attention to the tribe. A typical reaction frame is seen in an article from the *Spokesman Review*, where the journalist writes, “The name Twilight is attached to almost any commercial enterprise imaginable, from restaurants to souvenir stores to area tours. For \$4, a camper can buy a bundle of firewood from the Twilight wood stand just south of town. The Quileutes, whose tradition says they are descended from wolves, are the tribe mentioned in the stories.” Another



article from McClatchy news shows reaction to the Hollywood series through a name change for the Quileute: “‘Twilight’ Tribe Wins Land Transfer.”

Only three of the articles written in this period employed the *Mystical Indian* frame – with two of these coming from local “TV news.” One of them – an NPR story – equates the Quileute with “werewolves”: while noting that the Tribe had created an online video meant to tell the “true story” of their tribe, the article moves on without attempting to provide the truth, leaving the association with werewolves standing. The other two seemed determined to take Tribe back in time: A *Spokesman Review* article writes, “The Quileute Tribe holds several distinctions. It is among Washington's smallest tribes. It is arguably one of its most famous. It is also among its most endangered. The first may have been true even when the White Drifting-House people, as the tribe called Caucasian settlers on ships, first showed up.... The tribal legends tell of great floods and a great bird in the mountain that creates storms by flapping his giant wings.” Another article from *McClatchy* referred to the Quileute as “an ancient tribe with... a deep connection to the sea.” While articles like these may tell some truth from Quileute myth, they also provide an example of portraying Native Americans as “ancient and exotic” (Weston, 1996, p. 160).

### **Summary of Analysis**

One of the most consistent and important frames that emerges from analysis is that of *Omission*. Both Tribes and their perspectives were ignored by the news media for years: The cultural, spiritual, environmental, and economic needs of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribal members were disregarded for almost a century, while Quileute Tribal members lived in danger of floods and tsunamis for hundreds of years. The significance of the absence of coverage is that, in order for various environmental justice issues experienced by Indigenous groups to gain

sufficient attention (and therefore, perhaps, resolution), they first need to be *acknowledged*.

Otherwise they remain the “un-people” whose important issues remain disregarded and unseen by the majority of the public and policymakers. After gaining media acknowledgement, however, the next step for these groups is *how* they will be covered, which includes whether their perspectives are provided.

Once the prominent dam removal project began, the positive story of a river brought back to environmental balance was conjoined with the success of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. In other words, because this was a “feel good” success story for both the environment *and* the Tribe, there was more likelihood of positive coverage for both. In addition, perhaps because the dam removal was the largest of its kind in the world, and because the Tribe lived in such proximity, the increased media coverage naturally lent itself to increased coverage of the Tribe. During and after dam removal, the Tribe’s perspective was sought and quoted, and some emphasis was finally placed on the importance of renewing the Tribe’s cultural connection to the land and resources. Part of the reason that the *Mystical Indian* frame was not commonly found in coverage of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe is perhaps because the Tribe’s perspective (once dam removal had begun) was provided by the news media, thus avoiding the White, patriarchal lens of corporate news media of which Benson (2005) warns. Although there was less media coverage of the Quileute, the *Mystical Indian* frame was observed slightly more often. Some of the allusions to werewolves from *Twilight* may have lent themselves to this frame, but the ultimate reason why the Quileute were treated as mystical more often than the Elwha remains unknown. What is known is the consequence for representing Native American groups in this way: if they can be shown as anachronistic or primitive, there is little reason to think that they need “real world” change - in this case, to move out of a dangerous tsunami zone.

Some of the other frames have different implications for the Tribes. For the Quileute, *Reaction* frames were more prominent. Once Hollywood's *Twilight* came to theatres and the Japanese tsunami hit, the Tribe effectively took advantage of what Schudson (2011) refers to as "event, action, and people-centered" news: while *Twilight* brought fame to the tribe, the Japanese disaster provided a clear visual for the possible future of the Quileute should a tsunami occur. The "reaction" frames were intriguing because they suggest that the news media had disregarded the environmental concerns of the small Tribe for years until other events occurred to make the concerns "newsworthy." What is most interesting is that, when they were finally receiving some news media attention, the Quileute were able to influence the coverage to frame their problem as a "public safety" issue by hiring an experienced publicist who released a video that focused on safety of Quileute elders and children. The tribal newsletter *The Talking Raven* noted the effectiveness of the public relations' efforts: "the theme of the video was also the theme the media focused on in the last year and a half" (2012, p. 1). As a result, the Quileute provide an example of the "insurgent redefinition of Indigenous people and cultures by Native Americans themselves" as identified by Loew (2012, p. 6), especially when their frame of *Public Safety* was able to overshadow a *Minimization* frame. When references to *Twilight* brought them some attention, the Tribe used this newfound publicity to promote a community video that tied the devastating Japanese tsunami to their own urgent public safety issue – an effective frame to which the news media responded.

Analysis reveals that, when the news media included stories about the environmental problems facing the Lower Elwha Klallam and Quileute, the articles quoted Tribal members often, provided some context for the issues, and – with a few exceptions – avoided facile stereotypes, sensationalism, or misrepresentations. The issue then remains one of quantity, not

necessarily of quality: of the 61 total articles about the Elwha dam, only 17 focused on what the Klallam had lost (or would gain) in relation to the dam construction or removal. In addition, the Quileute's numerous attempts over a century to move out of a dangerous coastal reservation were the subject of only 15 news articles (four of which were TV news), and the majority of which were written after the devastating Japanese tsunami hit and the *Twilight* films became popular.

### **Mainstream Media and the Politics of Indigenous Representations**

Merskin (2014) observes that “American Indians do not represent a significant target audience to advertisers, accounting for less than 1% of the U.S. population and are the most economically destitute of all minority groups (p. 198, citing Cortese, 2008). The economic considerations of Native Americans matter when it comes to journalism – an industry so reliant upon advertising dollars. As Benson (2005) notes, communities of color are often ignored when they fall “outside the advertising demographic” (p. 5), and that “market pressures and journalistic competition certainly do not always produce a multicultural vision of the world” (p. 14).

The broader economic trends in journalism provide one reason why the environmental problems facing the Elwha and Quileute were ignored by mainstream news for so long. Combined with commercial news media's historical reluctance to cover Native American issues, Indigenous people encounter significant challenges to get adequate coverage that provides in-depth consideration, context, and accurate representation of their environmental problems. This coverage is important, because news media *construct* knowledge for the public, as Heinz (2005) reminds us. Critical, in-depth coverage of environmental justice issues is crucial, because without it there is little public attention paid to these issues - and without attention, there is little forward motion to resolve these complex environmental justice issues involving land, ecology,

and culture. Keene (2015) underscores the importance of accurate representation, noting that the images in the media often

are the only images our society sees of Native peoples. They are the images that are burned in our brains from the first watching of Peter Pan to weekly Monday night football, and they matter... If Native peoples are only situated in the imaginations of the public, we will never have the support and understanding we need to move our communities forward” (p. 102-103).

This research reveals that, while progress has been made in the quality of news media coverage of Indigenous environmental justice issues, lack of coverage remains an issue that continuously needs to be challenged.

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