

Analyzing the differences in the media representation of indigenous involvement in the Stop Line 3 Protests in the US and Canada

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Abstract

The media representation of indigenous peoples differs in the US and in Canada, leading to varying levels of indigenous awareness between these two countries. This paper examines the extent to which the portrayal of indigenous involvement in the Stop Line 3 Protests in summer 2021 differ in mainstream US and Canada news outlets, including CBC, CTV, Global News, CNN, The New York Times, and Fox News. Findings suggest that Canadian news sources provide historical and cultural contexts more frequently, mention more costs of Line 3 than benefits, give more representation to indigenous voices, and portray indigenous peoples more positively. Sources from both countries use appropriate images and word choices; none of the sources mention actions readers can take to protect indigenous rights. Because Canadian sources provide better representations of indigenous peoples, the level of awareness on indigenous issues is higher in Canada than the US. However, sources from both countries should include more adequate historical context and highlight actions readers can take to protect indigenous rights.

Introduction

Indigenous issues occupy vastly different positions in Canadian and US political consciousness. While they have become increasingly visible in the Canadian media landscape in recent years, concerns with indigenous rights remain largely concealed within the American political culture. According to a study, only 34 percent of Americans believe that indigenous peoples face discrimination (First Nations Development Institute, 2018), while 9 out of 10 Canadians say “Aboriginal people are ‘often’ (46%) or ‘sometimes’ the subject of discrimination” (EnviroNics Institute for Survey Research, 2016). 63 percent of Americans surveyed support “doing more for Native Americans,” in comparison to 84 percent of Canadians (First Nations Development Institute, 2018). When there is a lack of awareness on indigenous issues and the urgent actions needed to protect indigenous rights, injustices against indigenous peoples consequently receive little public attention and will remain unaddressed. Reasons behind the higher levels of awareness on indigenous issues in Canada than in the US is thus worth investigating.

Media representation is an important factor to consider. Representations are constructions that tell stories interpreting particular groups of people or experiences (Nairn et al., 2017). Often, representation is assembled by the media using words, images, and narrative fragments (Nairn et al., 2017). Media representation has the power to “tell people what to think” (Entman, 1989). According to a study conducted by Entman, “Reading different [news]papers make a difference to the audience's attitudes” (Entman, 1989). In particular, “Attitudes toward unfamiliar matters are more susceptible to media influence than those toward the familiar” (Entman, 1989). Unfortunately, the media is not an “equal-opportunity self-schema afforder” (Fryberg et al., 2008), meaning that it does not provide equal representation for social groups. As Alia points out, the media often treats indigenous peoples as “un-peoples,” or people who are unworthy of coverage (Alia, 2004). Due to the lack of media coverage on indigenous issues, people are

often unfamiliar with these topics. As a result, their opinions on indigenous issues are more easily swayed by media influence.

Notably, the media is also the primary source of information people use to learn about indigenous issues. 3 out of 4 Canadians report paying “a great deal of attention” (22%) or “some attention” (51%) to news stories about Aboriginal peoples (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2016), and 78 percent of Americans believe it is important to feature more stories about Native Americans in news outlets (First Nations Development Institute, 2018). The influence of media representation, therefore, stands at the forefront of factors contributing to the varying levels of indigenous awareness in Canada and the US.

Given the power of the media in shaping the public’s understanding of indigenous issues, this paper seeks to explore how Canadian and US news outlets represent indigenous peoples differently. One major, indigenous-related event that captured the attention of both Canadian and US media is the Line 3 Replacement Project, which consists of replacing part of a 1,097-mile crude oil pipeline that runs from Alberta to Wisconsin. The replacement pipeline was installed from Joliette, North Dakota to Clearbrook, Minnesota (Enbridge, n.d.). This project was led by the multinational energy company Enbridge and was completed in September 2021, promising to benefit oil producers, improve product prices, increase property tax revenues, and provide thousands of jobs.

However, the Line 3 Replacement Project has faced significant opposition from indigenous tribes and climate activists. The pipeline cuts across large areas of tribal land, including the Fond du Lac reservation, treaty lands of several other bands of Ojibwe, and the headwaters of the Mississippi river (Arkansas Online, 2021). Indigenous groups have opposed the construction of Line 3 throughout its review process, arguing that “pipeline construction would damage and pollute fragile waterways” and increase the risk of oil spills, which would damage other ecosystems in the region (Arkansas Online, 2021). In addition to environmental concerns, Line 3 also has detrimental impacts on indigenous culture. As summarized by Endres, the conflict between indigenous communities and Enbridge and the US government lies in a different way of viewing land: “The various Tribes view the land as sacred, whereas the government sees it as a place of sacrifice” (Endres, 2012). Line 3 would impact sacred indigenous practices on tribal land. For instance, the risk of oil spill threatens the water where indigenous peoples grow wild rice. Wild rice symbolizes connections between subsistence gathering and the Ojibwe worldview, and the act of “making rice” expresses the relationship between Ojibwe people and the Earth (Arkansas Online, 2021). As the construction of Line 3 resumed in June 2021 after the spring thaw, indigenous peoples have led a series of protests against the pipeline. Given the large-scale attention that the Stop Line 3 Protests have garnered in news outlets, analyzing the potential differences in the media portrayal of indigenous peoples involved in the protests from June to August 2021 in Canadian and US news outlets is crucial to understanding the disparate levels of awareness on indigenous issues in these two countries.

Literature Review

The media portrayal of indigenous peoples in Canada and in the US has been well-researched. Considering Canadian media, Nelson et al. conducted a systemic analysis on the representation of indigenous peoples and the use of pain medication in Canadian news outlets. They found that in contrast to reporting on non-indigenous peoples, substance abuse among indigenous peoples is often discussed without consideration to pain-management, and a hopeless and victimizing language is employed (Nelson et al., 2016). Similarly, VanEvery

examined the media representation of indigenous murder victims in Canada, focusing specifically on the death of Colten Boushie, a First Nations man, and concluded that indigenous victims are sometimes dehumanized through narratives defending the murderer's actions as self-defense (VanEvery, 2019). However, scholars also argue that there was a general fairness in the representation of indigenous peoples by Canadian media. For example, Walker et al. analyzed articles involving renewable energy and indigenous peoples published in 6 mainstream Canadian media outlets and concluded that historical and cultural contexts are mostly present, and balanced portrayals of indigenous peoples were included, albeit some authors lack understanding of structural and historical oppressions against indigenous communities (Walker et al., 2018). These studies suggest that scholars hold mixed opinions towards the fairness and accuracy of the representation of indigenous peoples in Canadian media.

Considering media in the US, Leavitt et al. found that Native Americans rarely appear in mass media such as films and TV, and in the rare cases they appear, they are often portrayed as historical figures who conform to racial stereotypes (Leavitt et al., 2015). Similarly, Kelly found that commodified and stereotypical images of Native Americans, such as Native mascots, are ubiquitous in mass media and are often used to generate profits (Kelly, 2017). Focusing specifically on news outlets, Davidson et al. examined COVID-19 themed news stories involving indigenous peoples and concluded that they uphold visual tropes of primitiveness and helplessness (Davidson et al., 2022). These findings were mirrored in a study conducted by Perkins and Starosta on newspaper reports of Native American issues, where Native Americans are rarely "given credence through quotations, given rightful authority through the use of official titles, or have their ideas placed in primary positions" (Perkins and Starosta, 2010). Similarly, Moore and Lanthorn assessed the news media coverage of two Native American environmental justice cases and concluded that coverages of tribal perspectives, context, and accurate representation of environmental problems are absent (Moore and Lanthorn, 2017). These studies suggest that there is a general consensus among scholars that news media in the US does not provide adequate nor accurate representation of indigenous peoples.

One limitation of past studies is a comparison between the media representation of indigenous peoples in Canada and the US. This means that researchers currently know relatively little about how the accuracy and adequacy of indigenous representation in news outlets in these two countries differ, which could be an important factor that contributes to the disparate levels of awareness on indigenous issues in Canada and the US.

In addition to the representation of indigenous peoples in media, scholars have also examined the news coverage of pipeline protests involving indigenous peoples. For example, Crosby analyzed the news media reporting of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and concluded that most news sources failed to acknowledge the relationship between the legal battle surrounding the pipeline and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe involved (Crosby, 2020). Grote and Johnson also examined news articles reporting on the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and reached similar conclusions: non-indigenous mainstream media often fail to cite treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and colonial history as reasons for the protest, indicating a narrow understanding of the movement and the indigenous experience (Grote and Johnson, 2021). In addition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, scholars have also analyzed protests against the Trans Mountain Pipeline in Canada. For example, Dumas reviewed 368 news articles published by mainstream Canadian news outlets and concluded that there is no consensus among indigenous peoples regarding the future of the pipeline (Dumas, 2023). However, few

scholars have focused on the Stop Line 3 Protests. The only scholars who have researched this topic is Ernt and Joan, who examined local reports of the Stop Line 3 Protests and found that news outlets “depicted Line 3 most often through government/politics, economic, and environmental frames and rarely discussed climate change” (Ernt and Joan, 2020). However, Ernt and Joan’s study did not analyze the portrayal of indigenous peoples in the Stop Line 3 Protests.

This paper will seek to fill this gap by offering a detailed comparative analysis of the media representation of indigenous peoples and the Stop Line 3 Protests in Canadian and US news outlets, providing specific evidence by examining news articles published by mainstream Canadian and US news outlets. In so doing, it will help people better understand not only the Line 3 pipeline construction, but also the causes behind the disparate levels of awareness on indigenous issues in Canada and the US.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the research methodology. The following section examines the extent to which the portrayal of indigenous peoples in the Stop Line 3 Protests differs in Canadian and US news outlets. The final section reflects on the findings and questions for future research.

Methodology

This paper uses content analysis and critical discourse analysis to uncover how news outlets in Canada and the US frame indigenous involvement in the Stop Line 3 Protests. The data is composed of written news articles published by the top 3 most accessed media in Anglophone Canada and in the US that contain articles about indigenous peoples and Line 3. Media representations occupy different sides of the political spectrum, including liberal, conservative, and neutral, as indicated in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1: Selected Canadian Anglophone news outlets

Media outlet	Political lean	Monthly viewership
CBC	Center-left	52.7M
CTV	Neutral	47.3M
Global News	Center-left	24.8M

Table 2: Selected US news outlets

Media outlet	Political lean	Monthly viewership
CNN	Center-left	623.7M
The New York Times	Center-left	579.6M
Fox News	Right	298.6M

The first step in the data collection process was to compile relevant news articles. 6 searches were performed in each of the selected news outlets, using all possible combinations of the key terms below.

Terms for Stop Line 3 Protests (n=1)

“Line 3 pipeline”

Terms for indigenous peoples (n=6)

“Indigenous” or “Native” or “Aboriginal” or “First Nations” or “Metis” or “Inuit”

Only articles written in June, July, or August 2021 were included in the sample. Articles were included in the final sample if they discussed indigenous involvement in the Stop Line 3 Protests.

After duplicate articles were removed, a total of 15 articles was included in the final sample. The majority of articles came from Canadian news outlets, including CBC (5), CTV (2), and Global News (1), followed by US news outlets The New York Times (3), Fox News (3), and CNN (1).

After data collection, articles were analyzed using the critical discourse analysis to examine ways in which their narratives and representations of indigenous peoples may affect the readers' understanding of the roles indigenous peoples played in the Stop Line 3 Protests. Each article was assessed based on Table 3, which evaluates the historical and cultural contexts provided, description of the impacts on indigenous communities, dynamic between indigenous voices and voices of people in power, presence of calls to action, as well as appropriateness of words and images.

Table 3: Table of evaluation for selected articles

Historical context given? (i.e., treaty, colonialism)		
Cultural context given? (i.e., traditions, spiritual connections to land)		
Choice of words? (i.e., indigenous/native/Indian)		
Mentions pipeline's benefits? (i.e., jobs created, boosts local economy)		
Mentions pipeline's damages? (i.e., divides treaty land, water pollution)		
Indigenous voices	Direct quotes present?	
	Central/marginal voice in the narrative?	
	Positive/negative framing?	
Voices of environmentalists	Direct quotes present?	
	Central/marginal voice in the narrative?	
	Positive/negative framing?	
	Direct quotes present?	

State voices of power (i.e., politicians)	Central/marginal voice in the narrative?	
	Positive/negative framing?	
Corporate voices of power (i.e., Enbridge officials)	Direct quotes present?	
	Central/marginal voice in the narrative?	
	Positive/negative framing?	
Mentions what readers can do to protect indigenous rights?		
Use of appropriate images?		

Findings

Based on the content analysis conducted on 15 news articles from Canadian and US news outlets, several distinctions can be found in the portrayal of the Stop Line 3 Protests involving indigenous peoples in these two countries.

To begin with, Canadian news sources provided historical context, namely the traversing of tribal land and violation of treaty rights caused by Line 3, more often than US sources. 7 out of 8 Canadian sources mentioned the violation of treaty rights, and 1 source included details on what treaty rights entail, mentioning the right to “hunt, gather, and fish” on tribal land. In comparison, 4 out of 7 US sources mentioned the violation of treaty rights, 1 out of 7 mentioned the violation of “agreements [the US] made long ago with Indigenous people” but did not specify treaties, and 2 out of 7 did not include historical context at all. However, none of the sources explained in detail the history of the treaty-making process nor highlighted environmental injustice as a colonial legacy. Providing historical context is important to help readers understand the perspectives of indigenous protestors and their marginalized positions within the political system. Overall, Canadian sources have provided this information more adequately than US sources.

In addition, Canadian news sources provided cultural context more frequently than US sources, yet the US sources that did provide cultural context provided more adequate information than Canadian sources. 6 out of 8 Canadian sources mentioned Line 3’s disruption to indigenous harvesting and hunting practices, 5 out of 8 provided further details by mentioning fishing, cultivation of wild rice, and harvesting of medicinal plants, but none of the sources explained the cultural significance of these practices. In comparison, 2 out of 7 US sources mentioned the pipeline’s disruption to indigenous wild rice harvesting and provided cultural context by mentioning that the wild rice is “an important element of cultural heritage for local tribes;” 1 out of 7 sources mentioned the pipeline is “protecting the sacred” but does not explain in detail the meaning of “the sacred;” 4 out of 7 sources did not provide any cultural context. Providing cultural context is important to help readers recognize the importance of tribal land and traditional practices to indigenous communities and better understand reasons behind the indigenous opposition to Line 3. Similar to historical context, Canadian sources have provided

cultural context more frequently than US sources, albeit the latter provided this information in more detail.

Also, compared to US sources, Canadian sources cited more costs of the Stop Line 3 Protests than benefits. 6 out of 8 Canadian sources listed more costs than benefits, and 2 out of 8 listed a balanced number of costs and benefits. For US sources, 4 out of 7 sources listed more costs than benefits, 2 out of 7 listed a balanced number of costs and benefits, and 1 out of 7 listed more benefits than costs. Overall, Canadian sources presented a more favorable view towards the indigenous protestors than US sources.

Additionally, Canadian sources gave more voice to indigenous peoples than US sources. Canadian sources included an average of 0.875 direct quotes from indigenous peoples, 2 direct quotes from environmentalists, 0.875 direct quotes from state officials, and 1.125 quotes from corporate officials. US sources included an average of 1 direct quote from indigenous peoples and 1.14 direct quotes from environmentalists, state officials, and corporate officials each. 5 out of 8 Canadian sources placed indigenous voices as the central voice in the narrative compared to 2 out of 7 US sources; 6 out of 8 Canadian sources placed environmentalist voices as the central voice in the narrative compared to 3 out of 7 US sources. Overall, Canadian sources gave more representation to the voices of protestors (indigenous peoples and environmentalists combined) than US sources, in that the number of direct quotes from protestors included in Canadian sources is 0.735 more than that of US sources, and indigenous and environmentalist voices take a central position more frequently in Canadian sources. Although US sources have included 0.125 more direct quotes per article from indigenous peoples alone, they also included 0.28 more direct quotes from state and corporate voices of power. This suggests that US sources included more direct quotes on average than Canadian sources, regardless of the subjects that the quotes are attributed to. An ethical cornerstone of journalism is giving all sources a voice and opportunity to tell their stories. According to Glaz and Trofymczuk, by giving voice to a participant, “the narrator allows for that participant’s spatial and psychological viewpoints to emanate from the discourse” (Glaz and Trofymczuk, 2020). By giving more voice to indigenous protestors, Canadian sources presented a more favorable view towards the latter than US sources.

Furthermore, Canadian sources included a more positive portrayal of indigenous peoples compared to US sources. 3 out of 8 Canadian sources portrayed indigenous peoples positively, 4 out of 8 portrayed them neutrally, and 1 out of 8 portrayed them negatively. For US sources, 2 out of 7 portrayed indigenous peoples positively, 1 portrayed them neutrally, and 4 portrayed them negatively. Types of positive portrayal present in the sources include heroic, persistent, just, oppressed, gracious, cooperative, calm, and reasonable; negative portrayals include violent, irresponsible, careless, self-righteous, and unlawful. Given the power of the media in shaping people’s perspectives, the portrayal of indigenous peoples in media strongly impacts the readers’ perception of indigenous peoples in real life. Because Canadian media portray indigenous peoples more positively compared to US media, readers of Canadian news are more likely to view indigenous peoples positively than readers of US news.

Both Canadian and US sources included culturally-appropriate images and used appropriate words, including “indigenous,” “Native American,” and “Ojibwe,” to refer to indigenous peoples. However, none of the sources mentioned actions that readers can take to protect indigenous rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Canadian news outlets better represent indigenous peoples involved in the Stop Line 3 Protests than US sources by providing historical and cultural context more frequently, citing more costs of the project than benefits, giving more representation to the voices of indigenous peoples, and portraying indigenous peoples more positively.

Grasping the differences between the media representation of indigenous peoples in Canada and the US helps people better understand the causes of the disparate levels of indigenous awareness between these two countries. In US sources, the frequent exclusion of indigenous treaty rights and omission of the cultural significance of traditional hunting and harvesting practices, as well as citing more benefits of Line 3 than costs, would hinder readers' understanding of the positions and arguments held by indigenous peoples against the pipeline, thereby making it more difficult for readers to sympathize with indigenous peoples. In addition, by frequently marginalizing indigenous voices and centering state and corporate voices, readers would have less exposure to indigenous perspectives and, as a result, have fewer opportunities to learn about the injustices they experienced in the project. Finally, because US sources often portray indigenous peoples negatively, readers would likely internalize these portrayals and develop negative stereotypes of indigenous peoples in real life.

Although Canadian media provide better indigenous representation than US media, scope for improvement exists for both countries. For instance, neither US nor Canadian sources in the sample mentioned colonialism nor explained in detail the rights entailed by treaties, including land rights and the right to hunting and harvesting. These details will help readers better understand the historical and structural oppressions against indigenous peoples that perpetuate the environmental injustices they experience today, as well as specific ways in which Line 3 violates treaty rights. This would allow readers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the positions taken by indigenous peoples. At the same time, neither Canadian nor US sources mentioned actions readers can take to protect indigenous rights. Given that 63% of Americans and 84% of Canadians are willing to do more to support indigenous peoples (First Nations Development Institute, 2018), pointing out specific avenues to achieve this goal in news sources, such as educating friends and family and writing letters to government officials, would encourage tangible actions towards reconciliation.

This paper opens venues for future research on the media representation of indigenous peoples. In this paper, I only examined the Stop Line 3 Protests. Future scholars could focus instead on other environmental injustice news stories in the US and Canada, such as the constructions of the Dakota Access Pipeline and Trans Mountain Pipeline. Doing so would make the analysis on indigenous representation more comprehensive and in-depth.

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