“Mothers are Medicine”: U.S. Indigenous Media Emphasizing Indigenous Women’s Roles in COVID-19 Coverage

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Abstract
As COVID-19 surged in 2020, non-Indigenous media had a chronic disease of its own: sparse pandemic news from Indian Country. Within this inadequate coverage, there was an erasure of sources: Indigenous women were missing. This study evaluates the role of gender in U.S. Indigenous news coverage during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a qualitative thematic textual analysis, 161 Indigenous media news articles were analyzed to examine gendered news coverage themes from the time the United States instituted a nationwide quarantine until the autumn of 2020. U.S. Indigenous media amplified voices of the Indigenous women on the COVID-19 frontlines. This study focuses on Indigenous media as the benchmark for telling ethical diverse Indigenous community-focused stories, illustrating how women’s voices led media coverage and amplified issues. U.S. tribes are often matriarchal. As Europeans wielded disease and genocide as extermination tactics

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on these communities, women’s voices served as medicine to guide narratives to community solutions and healing. As such, this study seeks to add to current theoretical understanding of how Indigenous women’s roles were portrayed in COVID-19 coverage.

Keywords
COVID-19, indigenous media, pandemic, Native American women, indigenous voices

Introduction
Indigenous women in the United States led the creation of community across borders through media at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. They posted videos of themselves dancing the jingle dress dance, a traditional prayer for healing, on YouTube (APTN News, 2020). “It’s been medicine for us to be able to practice it and see it, not just us as an Indigenous people, but as a whole human race. We’re being strong and resilient for everybody” (CrowSpreadingWings, 2020, para. 21). The women dancers in the videos showed their community leadership and foregrounded the voices of women as healers and leaders during the pandemic.

U.S. Indigenous women lead their communities’ narratives about the pandemic’s impact on their people and lands through media use. Their social media use reached across borders and created deeper community bonds. Indigenous activists inform public discourse about self-determination and then mold that discourse to support contemporary issues (Baldy, 2016). Indigenous multimedia/print media sources amplified the often muffled voices of Indigenous women. This research seeks to amplify the voices of Indigenous women who advocate for their communities through media by speaking truth about the pandemic’s impact on them.

Common theories in the field of communication studies are steeped in colonial traditions (Azocar et al., 2021) and do not allow for an Indigenous perspective of the roles of Indigenous women’s voices in Indigenous news media coverage of COVID-19. Therefore, to decolonize our research, this study focuses on Indigenous media as the benchmark for telling diverse stories about Indian Country versus highlighting the inequities of mainstream media and uses Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) to guide the interpretation of the results. Decolonizing these stories means giving agency to Indigenous communities to tell their own diverse stories in the manner they choose.

Much like Indigenous media organizations, Indigenous communities have dealt with the pandemic in ways that ensure the continued survival of their citizens, including embracing media to unite communities around public health prevention and
vaccination efforts. For example, The Muckleshoot Tribe, which is about 30 miles south of Seattle, sent a digital newsletter and held Zoom meetings with members. Tribal Elders received paper copies of the newsletter. The campaign resulted in hundreds of cars lining up for the tribe’s first drive-through vaccination clinic. A quarter of the tribe’s 3,300 enrolled members were vaccinated by early February (Radnofsky et al., 2021, para. 22–24). Abigail Echo-Hawk (Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma), director of the Seattle, Washington-based Urban Health Institute, said non-Native public health efforts could learn a lot from Indigenous community-response and information-distribution efforts: “Whenever there’s discussions about Native Americans, it seems like they always talk about the problems, but they need to come to us, because we have the answers. We are using our cultural strength to not only survive but thrive amid horrific obstacles” (Radnofsky, et al., 2021, para. 25). This article underscores the ways Indigenous women used their positions as media producers and community leaders to focus on stories about lived experiences.

**Literature Review**

Although COVID-19, or, in the Navajo language, Dikos Ntsaaigíí-Náhástééts’áadah, spread throughout the entire world, numerous reports showed its disproportionate impact on Indigenous people because of the persistent health disparities they face (Cultural Survival, 2020a; Goha et al., 2020; Pan American Health Organization, 2020). “Indigenous women and girls are often disproportionately affected by epidemics and other crises” (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 1). Indigenous people are more likely to live in isolated and hard-to-reach areas, which means access to healthcare is difficult. Worldwide, Indigenous peoples make up only 6% of the population, but 19% of the extreme poor, and this is consistent in rural and urban environments and across national and international borders (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 1), creating on-going health disparities for Indigenous people.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit American Indian and Alaska Native populations hard. According to the Centers for Disease Control, infection rates were 3.5 times higher among U.S. American Indian and Alaska Natives as compared to non-Hispanic Whites, and the COVID-19 death rate was 1.8 times higher among American Indian and Alaska Natives (Arrazola et al., 2020). In New Mexico alone, the state’s Indigenous community, which is only 11% of its population, accounted for 57% of the COVID-19 cases and 50% of its deaths (Goha et al., 2020, p. 207). A study of COVID-19 occurrences on American Indian reservations early in the pandemic found as of April 10, 2020, Indigenous people were infected with the virus at a rate four times higher than the rest of the U.S. (Rodriguez-Lonebear et al., 2020, para. 24).

That Indigenous people are suffering the brunt of COVID-19 is not lost on communities whom Whites weaponized diseases, such as smallpox, against in the past. The government’s neglect of health care in Indigenous communities is the modern-day equivalent of that weaponization. The loss of economic resources and their related negative health effects are well-known (Conti et al., 2010). The access to material and
human resources provided through financial well-being leads to better health outcomes. In minority communities, and especially in rural communities where many tribal communities still reside, the loss of those resources has a more profound and long-lasting impact on both individuals and communities (Probst et al., 2004) particularly after disasters (Hutchins et al., 2009).

While historical health abuses of Indigenous people, such as the forced sterilization of American Indian women in the 1960s and 1970s, have left Indigenous people wary of non-Indigenous healthcare, they have embraced vaccinations as a way to protect their culture and communities. Echo-Hawk found 75% of the 1,435 Indigenous people surveyed would take the COVID-19 vaccine “because they put the ‘we’ ahead of the ‘me’” (Radnofsky et al., 2021, para. 9). “The primary motivation for participants who indicated willingness to get vaccinated was a strong sense of responsibility to protect the Native community and preserve cultural ways. Despite hesitancy towards the vaccine due to historical and current abuse from healthcare and government institutions, they ultimately felt the heavy cost of COVID-19 on their community outweighed potential risks from the vaccine” (Radnofsky et al., 2021, para. 10).

The United Nations recognized the importance of improving media infrastructures in Indigenous communities to aid an effective response to the global pandemic, adding that this infrastructure needed to “involve indigenous youth in the dissemination of COVID-19 messages within the communities both in mainstream languages as well as in indigenous languages, their command of social media makes them a fundamental player in this situation” (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020, p. 3).

Women’s use of social media to spread the jingle dress dance was one way Indigenous women used easily accessible media as a community outreach tool. In a Minnesota Public Radio piece, jingle dress dancer Manidoonibikwe (Fond du Lac Ojibwe) explained that the women saw themselves as guides for their communities and for those who could develop a cure: “We were not only dancing for our healing, but also to guide our scientists and physicians, into finding a cure, or help for the people. So this wasn’t just for us, it’s for everybody” (Kraker, 2020). Social media gave jingle dress dancers a way to safely and broadly spread a message about embracing COVID-19 prevention measures that would resonate with the North American Indigenous peoples’ belief in and value around the sacredness and interconnectedness of each person in their community (Cram, 2020).

**Stereotypes in Non-indigenous Media**

Non-Indigenous media often stereotype Indigenous people. Studies have found White narratives of Indigenous people tend to romanticize them and cast them as simpletons or portray them as victims (Mohamed, 2019), including in coverage of COVID-19. To counteract this, Indigenous women embraced media production by posting on social media as well as by being interviewed by Indigenous news organizations; they did this as a way to ensure Indigenous stories were told throughout the pandemic. The women’s use of media, oftentimes even interviewed by an Indigenous female
journalist, is a nod to the many matriarchal ways of U.S. tribal communities pre-colonization and showed unity in spreading healing across Indian Country.

News articles created by Indigenous journalists offer their audiences meaningful cultural and social perspectives by encouraging ownership of issues that leads to social responsibility (Srinivasan et al., 2004). Indigenous journalists operate to accurately reflect the communities they report for, to champion coverage of the rights of Indigenous peoples, to correct the mistakes and the misinterpretations of non-Indigenous media, and to preserve cultural traditions (LaPoe & LaPoe, 2017; Murphy, 2010). Indigenous stories are often written thematically, with depth; focused on complete community coverage; and placed within a historical context (LaPoe & LaPoe, 2017).

Many Indigenous peoples around the world see media production as a way to preserve and transmit their culture, and a way to defend their rights (Cultural Survival, 2020b, para. 1). Cara Dukepoo (Diné) said, “Native media empowers Indigenous communities to inform, engage, and even protect their people with culturally relevant programming” (CS Staff, 2019, para. 2).

**Indigenous Standpoint Theory**

Indigenous and feminist standpoint theories guide this research, noting the power and responsibility of who is speaking and how voice adds to an accurate contextualized knowledge within each framework’s focus. IST research design is participatory, exploratory, descriptive, and privileges Indigenous voices to ensure our people are active contributors rather than passive objects of study (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020). It can contextualize the ways Indigenous women media producers empowered their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. IST evolved out of Feminist Standpoint Theory, a White-woman-centric response to western-dominated, patriarchal scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences (Foley, 2003) that excluded the experiences of minority ethnic and racial women (Weiss Hanrahan, 2000). IST contextualizes content into meaningful cultural and social perspectives Indigenous communities can relate to (Rigney, 1999). It provides a framework for Indigenous scholars to define research, methodologies, and the interpretation of results in a culturally appropriate way because of their lived realities (Rigney, 1997). IST is agentic because it privileges Indigenous voices and ensures Indigenous scholars are active contributors to research about their communities rather than passive subjects (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020). It also recognizes Indigenous researchers’ responsibility to give agency to the communities they are researching (Menzies, 2001). IST specifically highlights the importance of Indigenous voices, which provide a more accurate decolonized history and stress shared cultural experiences (Foley, 2003; Kwaymullina, 2017; Rigney, 1999). What this means is that as Indigenous media scholars, we are utilizing a lens immersed in our own knowledge of Indigenous media; with this understanding, we are aware that within its own mission, Native media uses IST as the theory behind their principles of journalism.
and reporting. We also recognize Indigenous women, as participants in journalism via sources and as reporters, apply standpoint theory to contribute to their communities. IST allows scholars to understand meaning-making in terms of community and in terms of its model for journalism. Indigenous communities think of knowledge and experience and how it is the basis for their model of journalism. This theory moves the needle to truths about diverse Indian Country communities defined by lived Indigenous experiences. In this sense, objectivity, which no one may truly achieve at all times, is considered nuanced and connected to individual stories versus the whole of Indian Country. Representation is also about these same connections to Indigenous communities—something non-Native media, collectively, have not figured out how to report on, unless by creating an Indigenous affairs desk with Indigenous community-connected reporters.

The first news media content to use IST examined the difference in non-Indigenous and Indigenous news coverage of the COVID-19 crises in Indian Country (Azocar et al., 2021). It showed how economic inequality and non-Indigenous ignorance about Indigenous gaming operations lead to stereotypical non-Indigenous news coverage of Indigenous communities during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found non-Indigenous reporting didn’t show how critical gaming operations are to Indigenous community economies and mainly focused on loss, including lacking or underfunded resources and government tensions. IST highlighted the differences in these narratives by Indigenous and non-Indigenous media and differentiated the ways Indigenous people tell their stories. IST gave the researchers a deeper understanding of the differences between non-Indigenous media and Indigenous media.

As such, this research also builds on the framework from the first study by which future media researchers can apply IST to studies of non-Indigenous coverage of Indigenous communities, particularly in contrast to Indigenous narrators’ media production for Indigenous communities.

Exploring Gender and Indigenous Coverage of COVID-19

This research explores news coverage by women and about women connected to Indigenous communities and COVID-19 through a qualitative analysis. The authors found Indigenous women were community leaders in Indigenous-owned and produced publications and that Indigenous women news producers told stories focused on other Indigenous women and highlighted inequality without replicating stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. Only a handful of non-Indigenous media outlets employ Indigenous writers. Only two U.S. non-Indigenous news outlets in the have an established Indigenous affairs desk at a non-Indigenous newsroom, both started by former Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) President, Tristan Ahtone: High Country News and the Texas Observer.

Through this examination of gendered themes, this study reveals the ways U.S. Indigenous news coverage foregrounded women’s voices and showed them as community leaders. The following questions guided our research:
RQ1: To understand the COVID-19 news landscape, how did Indigenous media contextually make sense of an inequitable health crisis?
RQ2: In what ways were women shown in Indigenous news coverage and what does it mean by the news space in which they were included?

**Method**

Often, Indigenous media is compared to another form of media, where stories are lacking or aren’t present for evaluation (Azocar et al., 2021). Past research on news coverage of Indigenous communities may only legitimize knowledge about these communities from a non-Indigenous perspective. That research ignores the knowledge Indigenous researchers inherently have about their communities and the ways those communities collect and disseminate knowledge. As Indigenous researchers, we are reclaiming that knowledge as a purposeful act that benefits Indigenous communities, instead of considering them as lacking. “For decades, research on Indigenous peoples, people of color, marginalized people, has been very deficit oriented, it’s been damaging, harmful, exploitative. And in order to decolonize, researchers must consciously move away from those approaches and be proactively in support of Indigenous peoples” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

This research occurs at a time when academic journals are rarely inclusive of Indigenous voices, as both researchers and topics of research. Examining content only about Indigenous communities, created by Indigenous communities and Indigenous journalists, provides an authentic approach to understanding that content in comparison to “us vs. them” and “mainstream vs. ethnic media” paradigms. Examining journalism through the lens of Indigenous journalism culture provides insights into the way Indigenous communities report on themselves and the issues that affect them. Indigenous journalism culture empowers, offers a counter-narrative, is culturally appropriate, assists with language revitalization, and provides a watchdog function (Hanusch, 2013; LaPoe & LaPoe, 2017). Those unfamiliar with Indigenous news outlets may not understand how a robust sample of Indigenous news stories can be gathered online. But NAJA has more than 900 members and Indigenous news has a robust and easily accessible online presence, if you are connected to Indian Country and are aware of these outlets (NAJA, 2021).

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2012) states in her work on decolonizing methodologies, we must ask ourselves who created knowledge and who decided the benchmark of what is accepted as knowledge? Indigenous communities are thriving, and Indigenous Nations handled COVID-19 response better than most non-tribal communities (Brown, 2021). With Indigenous journalism as the benchmark, therefore, this study evaluates the journalists, news content, and sources for their inherent knowledge. A goal of this study is to guide both Indigenous and non-Indigenous media practices by highlighting stories of front-line women leaders told from within Indigenous
communities, often by female Indigenous reporters, and not in comparison to the regurgitation of stereotypes and tropes.

Therefore, this research examines only news stories, excluding opinion pieces, from Indigenous media organizations. We examined 161 stories from nine Indigenous media outlets, ranging from local to national coverage and included four news stories from a non-Indigenous news organization with an Indigenous affairs desk. These were gathered from a Google search using the specific terms together: “Native Americans,” “news,” “Covid,” and “pandemic” (see Table 1).

This research was conducted in September of 2020, and news story dates ranged from the beginning of the U.S. public’s awareness of the pandemic—February 26, 2020 through September 16, 2020. While our Google search resulted in more than 15,000 hits at this point in pandemic coverage, we eliminated stories that were opinion or were not from Indigenous media outlets—except for the four with an Indigenous affairs desk—which resulted in our data set. Once we saw news stories no longer appearing on the pages, we felt our search was exhaustive. Two researchers, including a former NAJA board member, went through the above search process and compared Excel sheet results, which listed the news organization, date, headlines, author, sources, and overall themes of the news story. Their Holsti agreement, was the acceptable number, 0.90.

While “Google” in itself may appear limiting, many Indigenous news outlets have an online presence and with our knowledge of Indigenous media, we felt comfortable with our data set, at this point in time of the pandemic news cycle. Texts were read multiple times and color-coded according to rhetorical strategies and symbols informed by our conceptual framework. From this list themes were examined and re-examined with the IST lens.

**Textual Analysis**

As Alan McKee (2014) states, textual analysis “is a methodology—a data gathering process—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members

| News outlet                                      | Story count |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Native News                                      | 1           |
| Navajo Hopi-Observer                             | 1           |
| Osage News                                       | 2           |
| Cherokee Phenix                                  | 3           |
| Indianz                                          | 4           |
| High Country News Indigenous Affairs Desk        | 4           |
| Navajo Times                                     | 43          |
| Indian Country Today                             | 103         |
| Total                                            | 161         |

*Note. Articles found via a Google search between February 26, 2020 and September 16, 2020 for the following terms together: “Native Americans,” “news,” “Covid,” and “pandemic”.*
of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (p. 1). Textual analysis focuses on the interpretation of text as a form of communication to describe and evaluate messages (Morris, 2004). Unlike quantitative research with calculations of frequency and reliability, the qualitative researcher analyzes information through overall interpretation and repetition of themes. Within our textual analysis, IST enabled the Indigenous media researchers to use their inherent knowledge, which assists in the empowerment, preservation, and retention of Indigenous knowledge (Rigney, 1999).

Findings and Discussion

Indigenous Standpoint Theory and Findings Overview

Indigenous Standpoint Theory supports that in order to understand findings within our dataset, we must acknowledge that everything is connected. We must note that to understand truth for Indigenous communities, even during a global health crisis, means awareness of who has written history to this date and what rights are afforded to whom and by whom under what condition (e.g., broken treaties). For those not used to IST, it may seem that going back to past historical points is not needed or not connected to our research questions, but it is. To understand the knowledge within our data set and to answer how people responded within communities, readers must understand that this response has a possible historical context to it, rooted in rights and responsibility.

Overall Main Themes

Using IST to focus specifically on Indigenous media sources, including a news outlet with an Indigenous Affairs desk dedicated Indian Country reporters, revealed that Indigenous media sources gave news space to include women’s voices, in particular, to highlight the importance of culture and context for Indigenous communities responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous media sources utilized women’s words to reinforce three main themes: women faced and overcame medical and economic inequity; women took on leadership roles in creating and reinforcing cultural resilience; and women’s voices were uplifted to show the importance of the matriarchy. The examples shared to answer our research questions are representative of the themes we saw emerge.

RQ1: To Understand the COVID-19 News Landscape, How Did Indigenous Media Contextually Make Sense of an Inequitable Health Crisis?

Many Indigenous journalists understand how Indigenous communities fund services and use economic gains communally, so they were able to tell a richer story about the particular challenges during the pandemic. For example, for some, tribes directly
fund their own community health in Indian Country, which means using money from casinos, thereby giving tribes’ members jobs and then directly returning money back to the tribal health care systems (Azocar et al., 2021). This economic backbone is important because many Indigenous communities do not levy taxes upon their communities. Indigenous reporters and outlets know the history behind communal tribal resources and broken treaty promises on the part of the U.S. government, which have left tribes without promised support. COVID-19’s impact on capitalist economies exacerbated already existing issues. However, in Indian Country, policies shuttering casinos blocked one of the few sources of income available to address the global pandemic for many tribes (Azocar et al., 2021; Mineo, 2020). Knowing how a community funds services is essential to understanding and unpacking issues connected to the pandemic.

**Overcoming Economic Inequity.** A theme that emerged within this “making sense of the COVID crisis in Indian Country" framework noted past economic inequities and highlighted overcoming these barriers. Broken treaties and broken support, which equaled issues of medical access during the pandemic, appeared and captured this issue (Indian Health Services, 2019). Indian Health Services, which is a federal program funded by Congressional appropriations, reported it was working with tribal partners to respond to COVID-19 (Indian Health Services, 2020; IHS.gov, 2021). However, November 2020 reports of women and children feeling abandoned at the Phenix Indian Medical Center drew in-depth consideration at Indigenous outlets. *Indian Country Today*, a nationally to internationally reaching Indigenous media outlet, reported that the medical center shut down unexpectedly in August:

Phoenix Indian Medical Center operates under Indian Health Service and abruptly shut down its birthing center on Aug. 26, saying it was temporary and due to facility infrastructure, equipment and staffing challenges. It’s unclear when it will reopen, if at all (Walker, 2020, para. 4).

Amanda Tom (Navajo), shared her frustration, “Here we are in the middle of the pandemic, and they are closing the hospital down, parts of it” (Walker, 2020, para. 3). The story appeared with an image of protestors holding signs saying “Broken Treaties, Broken Promises,” “IHS Honor and Protect our Women and our Unborn,” “Natives Lives Matter,” “Systemic Genocide,” and “Honor Native Women.” IHS has consistently been underfunded by the federal government and appropriations historically have paid HIS doctors at a lower rate (Warne & Bane Frizzell, 2014).

IHS’s newsroom fact sheet highlights the need for better reporting within the context of history, treaties, and rights:

There still exists a belief that American Indians and Alaska Natives are not citizens of their states and are not eligible for state programs and benefits. American Indians and Alaska Natives, as citizens of the United States, are eligible to participate in all public, private, and state health programs available to the general population. In addition, they also
have treaty rights to federal health care services though the Department of Health and Human Services. The federal trust responsibility to uphold the treaty responsibility for health care to Indians is accomplished by consulting with Indian Tribes and then actively advocating for policy, legislative, and budgetary planning for Indian health care (IHS.gov, 2015, para. 5).

For those not aware of the history of promises and treaties, the lack of health access during a pandemic may seem like the fault of an individual; however, understanding the context and intention behind this infrastructure problem shifts the blame to the U.S. Federal Government and its failure to honor the law and its responsibility to Indigenous people.

Analyzes of this same Indian Country reporting, in terms of rights, access, and economic recovery, also needs to be contextualized with an understanding of intercultural tensions and the layers some communities may be working between in order to get funding. Internal tensions within Indigenous communities during the pandemic were also shown in community reporting, as in this excerpt from the Navajo Times:

Divisiveness between the legislative and executive branches could hinder the process of spending the $600 million from the CARES Act.

This first year of this administration has shown disagreement between executive and legislative. While President Jonathan Nez has exercised his veto power, the Council responded with override votes. These were a few examples of the tension brewing between the two branches (Becenti, 2020a, para. 1–2).

Understanding the layers of government and relationships between tribal leaders and their relationships with the federal government is essential to understanding the infrastructure of federal healthcare funding and its impact on community.

**Community Equity: Cultural Healing.** Economic inequities from historically broken treaties caused layers of crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic as tribes attempted to receive federal funding while addressing cultural needs to recover. These histories were part of the reporting on community healing, as noted in an Indian Country Today story by Walt Hollow (Assiniboine and Yankton Sioux), Associate Professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine:

For Indian medical students, I would identify who lives a traditional lifestyle and follows the traditional ways of their tribe. And for those that do, I encourage them to utilize those traditional ways to manage their stress, their anxiety, as they learn about the virus and its bad effects. (Indian Country Today, 2020).
RQ2: In What Ways Were Women Shown in Indigenous News Coverage and What Does it Mean by the News Space in Which They Were Included?

Cultural Equity: Women’s Voices and Roles in Resilience. Before we go on to explore gender more fully, we acknowledge that not all lifestyles are the same within Indigenous communities. However, in general, Indigenous women led in the fight against COVID-19 by utilizing personal strengths, managing energy, positive framing, relationship building, and collaborating with others to take advantage of opportunities (Hill & Keogh Hoss, 2018) to share knowledge. Many Indigenous communities are matrilineal, meaning that people are seen as descending from their matrilineal lines, and women are central to health care decision making and passing culture down through generations (Cesario, 2001). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous women’s articulation of Indigenous knowledge through social media contributed to creating a community of service that respected distinct expressions of cultural and gender identity (Maracle et al., 2020).

Stereotypical images of Indigenous people abound in society, so detailed descriptions are essential in reporting to take a reader to accurate images of contemporary Indigenous individuals and communities. In this way, stories serve as an act or action to unpack and understand context, history, and intent. Indigenous news outlets provided community-focused stories with women-led solutions during the pandemic.

Collective Resilience through Indigenous Women’s Leadership. One of the clearest themes Indigenous news outlets replicated was one of community or collective resilience through Indigenous women’s leadership. For example, the Navajo Times May 28, 2020 story, “With bleach and a prayer: In a tiny town, a clinic run by women holds the front line,” begins with a photo of seven of the nine women essential for COVID-19 response at the Navajo Mountain Health Center in Naatsis’áán-Rainbow City, Utah. The story opens by describing one of the women, Roxanna Yazzie, caring for her family before she even sees them:

When Roxanna Yazzie gets home after a long workday, she changes her clothes outside the back door, an entryway organized like a hospital undressing area, because she cannot risk contaminating the house.

When she’s dressed in clean clothes, she enters the house and heads straight for the bathroom for a hot shower, careful not to touch anything but the door handles. When she’s clean, she embraces her children and settles down for the night (Allen, 2020a, para. 1–2).

Both the imagery and the inclusion of women-united collectively appeared as important symbols, an act, of “resilience.” It wasn’t one person fighting the pandemic. It was a community of women, healers—those who brought in life through childbirth were working together to save it during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women were elevating
and empowering women to the extent that the news story was also written by a Dine’ (Navajo) woman, Krista Allen. Allen commented on reporting about her Nation:

‘[Navajo people] don’t often get the chance to tell their stories, so I never try to get off the phone with my sources,’ she says. ‘Their voices need to be heard. I give them as much time as they want to talk, however long they need’ (Minutaglio, 2020, para. 10).

Giving time to her sources was apparent in Allen’s reporting of the women on the COVID-19 front line, which was 36 paragraphs long. Allen discussed the importance of being a Dine’ woman reporting for the weekly Indigenous paper, which operates separate from her tribe as a free press.

‘It breaks my heart,’ she says, ‘to write about my own people dying. But these kinds of stories need to come from me.’

She keeps two iPhones with her at all times: One for emailing, and the other for texting and calling. ‘In times of crisis,’ she says, ‘it’s best just to listen.’ Which, she does via phone for hours on end (Minutaglio, 2020, paras. 8 and 9).

Allen also said she prayed for her sources before leaving her home on the Navajo Nation.

Allen’s COVID-19 reportage highlighted the importance of her community working together to get past the pandemic (Allen, 2020a, 2020b).

‘When there’s stuff that is hard for us to do, we just all come in a group and ask one another, ‘Who knows how to do this?’’ she said. ‘Most of us were raised here in Navajo Mountain. We all work together and fix it ourselves. Especially when we have an emergency patient and we can’t lift that patient; we all work together to lift them up. And if we have a domestic violence, like if we can’t hold down a patient, we still have strength to work together. But we stabilize the patient pretty well.’ (Allen, 2020a, para. 5).

The concept of “working together” was also emphasized by another female reporter, Joaqlin Estus (Tlingit) of Indian Country Today: “We’re going to work together” (Estus, 2020a, para.1), as she described the strength that comes from Alaska’s history with disease.

Culture and Resilience Equity: Transmission through Women’s Leadership. Other clear themes in Indigenous media reports on COVID-19 and Indigenous women were culture and resilience. Here, women build resilience through the conveyance and continuance of their cultures. They make their communities stronger. One example of this is from The Navajo Times showing a Dine’ pageant as a cultural event that went far beyond women dressing up for a beauty contest. Navajo pageants are about understanding traditions, such as butchering sheep; as noted in past academic work, if you ate at
the market across the street from the newspaper, which was located in a strip mall at the time, you’d see pictures of Navajo pageant winners on the wall. As you sat and ate mutton stew, smelled the roasting of green chilis and decided whether to put honey on your fry bread (LaPoe & LaPoe, 2017), you understood more about the connection between the two. When analyzing this data, from these past reports as we use IST as a lens, we knew the following story meant more than what one may traditionally understand of a non-Indigenous pageant. Covering the utilization of technology to share tradition and culture, as a known member in the community, was also a form of resilience.

The teaching and portrayal of Indigenous culture in various media showed Indigenous resilience in important ways. Dine’ journalist Arlyssa Becenti highlighted this in her May 21, 2020 piece in the *Navajo Times*.

Dr. Jennifer Jackson-Wheeler is a former Miss Navajo, an associate professor, grandmother and a lover of cooking. She has combined all these attributes into making short cooking videos in Navajo and posting them on Facebook for her one-year-old granddaughter.

‘I do what I can with family, sharing knowledge given to me by my mother, Ella Jackson, my aunts, and my late grandmother, but when I became a grandparent recently, it changed me,’ said Jackson-Wheeler (Becenti, 2020b, para. 1–2).

This theme of thriving and surviving also appeared in coverage of the healing tradition and the importance of artists in education. A story in *Indian Country Today* by reporter Mary Annette Pember (Red Cliff Band of Wisconsin Ojibwe) included Native language and the digital importance of healing:

Zibaaska’iganagooday is the exploding sound in the Ojibwe language and it has a long history of healing.

Community song and dance have always been a part of healing and prayer for Native people. In this time of social distancing, however, people are putting a digital spin on these healing traditions. People all over Indian Country are organizing virtual powwows and other social dances via social media as a means to offer hope and spiritual support during the Covid19 pandemic (Pember, 2020a, para. 1–2)

Pember’s (2020b) coverage of technology and healing also continued in “TikTok posts can help us heal,” which features jingle dress dancer Erin Tapahe (Dine’). Tapahe gained tens of thousands of followers during the pandemic as she and her father, Eugene Tapahe, a photographer, promoted their work via social media (Tapahe, 2020).

When he found most of his shows and exhibitions were canceled due to the pandemic, he began work on a project entitled, ‘Art Heals: The Jingle Dress Project.’ Leveraging the wisdom and history of the Ojibwe jingle dress dance, he decided to take ‘the healing
power of the dance to the land to travel’ by capturing a series of images to document the spiritual places where Native people once walked (para. 5).

Erin Tapahe was later hired by TikTok to create videos; Tapahe focused on covering the diversity within tribes as well as basic facts about Indigenous people.

‘I want to share the strength and successes of Native people; that’s my motto. So many people are unaware of Native culture and history,’ Tapahe says (Pember, 2020b, para. 14).

**Matriarchal Equity: Women as Sources, Reporters, and Healers are Medicine.** Pember’s (2020c) article ‘Mothers are medicine,’ highlighted the central role of mothering to Indigenous cultures. The article included a photo of an Indigenous doula along with the stories of Indigenous “lactivists,” or women breastfeeding activists. Indigenous doula Shashana Nenookaasikwe Craft (White Earth Nation) stressed the “mothers are medicine” role with “studies showing that saliva from a sick baby sends messages to the mother’s body while nursing” and breastfeeding also “produce(s) antibodies to help the baby fight disease (Pember, 2020c, para. 3). The strength of healing, through the inherent knowledge of their culture, was clear as these Indigenous female journalists reported stories about other Indigenous women. Instead of a focus on what was lacking in Indigenous cultures due to COVID-19, the stories focused on what was gained via the resilience of Indigenous community and culture through their women.

Indigenous media promoted cultural resilience as the accurate presentation of information about the pandemic. Dr. Lynnae Lawrence, VA Pacific Islands Healthcare System, emphasized cultural resilience in an interview with Indian Country Today: “Always keep positive and remember our culture and where we came from. We’ve survived for thousands of years and will continue to survive’ (Talahongva, 2020, para. 27). The executive producer and the host for this segment, which is “the first national news show by and about Native Americans,” was longtime journalist, Patty Talahongva (Hopi), keeping with Indigenous women reporting on Indigenous women during the pandemic (Indian Country Today, 2019, para. 3).

**Indigenous Media Equity: Providing Power by Giving Space to Women’s Voices.** The final theme seen within our analysis is one that encompasses all of the other themes as well: Indigenous media consistently uplifted women’s voices to highlight cultural resilience and the importance of women as health care decision makers, leaders, and caretakers in their communities. As was shown in our analysis of the previous two themes, Indigenous media provided space for Indigenous women to lead in news stories, which provided perspectives by women from women.

The review of Indigenous press found Indian Country Today and the Navajo Times provided space for repeated themes of Indigenous women’s voices rising during COVID-19. The uplifting of women’s voices with context and complexity reinforced
the cultural importance of matriarchies within many Indigenous communities and how those matriarchies provide strength and resilience. The themes of access to care and resilience illustrated the importance of matriarchal voices in Indigenous cultures, particularly when it came to making health care decisions for their families and their communities (Santilli, 2020).

The women journalists and the women featured in Indigenous media reports showed resilience and fortitude ingrained within their cultural practices and beliefs during a time of international grief and despair. By placing stories central to Indigenous women within their history, culture, and context, women Indigenous media sources showed how Indigenous communities survived atrocities in the past and would continue to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though the communities still faced health care and economic inequity.

Indian Country Today (ICT) is a national news organization and the Navajo Times is a weekly paper. It is our hypothesis that the reason we saw the “uplifting of women voices themes” within these two particular Indigenous news outlets is because of their connection to community. The reporters from ICT are longtime Indigenous journalists who had resources, space, and their own resilience and inherently know that women lead in many Indigenous communities. The Navajo Times had female Dine’ reporters covering Dine’ women. It reminded us of past research connected to this paper and the Navajo Nation. The book, Indian Country: Telling a Story in a Digital Age (2017) notes the following in terms of connection:

Everything is connected—Father Sky, Mother Earth, the sun, and all the elements—earth, air, fire, and water. All these natural elements make up the world in which Native people live in every day. These elements are part of who a person is and even what he/she writes about as a journalist. Even saying ‘God Bless America,’ Navajo Times senior reporter Marley Shebala (Dine’) said, is interesting to think about because the Navajo people believe in blessing the entire universe, supporting the full circle collective thinking. Understanding history, context, and intent shows how reporting is a living thing and how it is all connected: the communicators to the community to the content and what is valued is what appears. Indigenous reporters reporting on Indigenous issues for Indigenous communities reasserts our knowledge about how to heal ourselves (LaPoe & LaPoe, 2017, p. 79).

Conclusion

This study used the IST framework and the researchers’ inherent knowledge to understand how Indigenous media amplified the voices of Indigenous women advocating for their communities by speaking truth about the pandemic’s impact on them and their communities. Our analysis began first by understanding how equity was displayed within Indigenous media as an avenue of healing, during an
inequitable pandemic. Culture, community, and the historical economic downfalls from broken promises all had ripple effects as communities tried to recover from COVID-19.

Women were highlighted in Indigenous media as a source of this recovery, what some may call good medicine in their own rights. Indigenous media told authentic stories about Indigenous women’s leadership on economic and health issues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by foregrounding Indigenous women’s voices. They did this first, by providing space in their coverage, and second, by focusing within this space on these three additional themes: women facing and overcoming medical and economic inequity; women’s roles in creating and reinforcing cultural resilience; and uplifting women’s voices to show the importance of the matriarchy.

Indigenous media have the cultural knowledge to understand the importance of amplifying Indigenous women’s because they know that many Indigenous cultures are historically matriarchal and derive strength from their matrilineal lines. Indigenous media used their intrinsic knowledge, therefore, to tell a broader story about women’s importance to the growth and continuance of tribal cultures. IST gave the researchers agency to understand that matriarchy was being foregrounded and was important to analyze. Thus, we recognized the role of Indigenous women and how they use their storytelling to benefit future generations, as their ancestors did for them through their actions.

While we do not want to paint a monolithic view of all Indigenous women prior to colonialism, many tribes operated in a more matriarchal and/or equitable manner (Baskin, 2020). Our analysis showed that Indigenous women used multiple media sources, including social media and digital news outlets, to reinforce and teach about their culture and its resilience to an international audience. IST allows a decolonized academic discussion of the role of the matriarchy in replicating and strengthening cultures; and allows the authors to highlight the ways that elder women’s knowledge provided the best response to COVID-19. Although the matriarchal structures that were the backbone of many U.S. Indigenous societies may not be as apparent today (Kearl, 2006), they are critical to the resilience and future of their communities. For future research, we encourage scholars to continue examining pandemic as well as other thematic coverage within Indigenous media.

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