The BIA Occupation: The Media Frames
A Native American Struggle to Gain Control

Presented at the
Association for Education in Journalism
and Mass Communications Annual Conference
Denver, CO August 2010

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Abstract

This paper discusses framing used by mainstream and Native American newspapers the BIA building takeover in Washington, D.C., in 1972. As expected, constructions differed in the newspapers with the native newspapers clearly reflecting Indian culture and mainstream newspaper reflecting the white culture.

The mainstream newspapers framed the event as insignificant and marginal and the protest as trivial and weak; Native Americans as not to be taken seriously, and U. S. government participants as responsible and effective. Native newspapers framed the event as a well-organized peaceful, spiritual undertaking; Native American participants as purposeful and champions for their race, and U. S. government representatives as simply a presence to embodiment of power and deceitful.
Fueled by outrage and sorrow over the death of Richard Oakes in September 1972, representatives of several Native American groups gathered in Denver, Colo., to hammer out plans for a caravan intended to bring a focus on Native American concerns to the Nixon Administration. That caravan became known as the “Trail of Broken Treaties” caravan and was considered by many to be the “greatest action taken by Indians since the Battle of the Little Big Horn”\(^1\)

The caravan began at several West Coast cities and traveled east—a reverse of the western settling of the United States. Once in St. Paul, Minn., write Smith and Warrior, the group as a whole “develop(ed) a position paper defining Indian needs in relation to the federal government.”\(^2\) After the three California groups arrived in St. Paul, leaders gathered to work out the final key issues for the document, titled the “Twenty Points Document.”\(^3\) Writers of the document included the aforementioned groups, plus representatives of the United Native Americans of Berkeley, San Francisco’s Native American Women’s Action Council, and the Coalition of Indian Controlled School Boards. However, only AIM became associated in the public’s mind with the takeover and this pushed the organization into the spotlight across America.\(^4\)

Images of American Indians coming out of the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in early November 1972 showed a group of defiant, and some would say deviant, Indians holding off U. S. marshals and Washington, D.C., police for 10 days. These images

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evoked the long-standing U.S. stereotype of American Indians as “savages” on the “warpath,” and provoked questions about images in mainstream and alternative press reports of the same event. In particular, what might press coverage show about one culture’s interpretation of events in another culture? Specifically, what images appear in Native American press coverage of the BIA occupation?

The purpose of this study was to explore how mainstream and Native American newspapers reported the same event involving Native American challenges to the mainstream culture. It is assumed here that reporters construct news stories to be understandable to reading audiences. In other words, news account constructions by journalists must conform to their audiences’ knowledge of their cultures for reports to have meaning. Native American journalists write for a more culturally diverse audience than do mainstream U.S. journalists in that members of their reading audience identify themselves by a group (tribal) identity rather than by an ethnic (racial) identity.

This research should also aid in understanding the cultural hegemony as reflected in newspaper coverage and may therefore contribute to the theory of social construction of reality. According to the theory, media reflect the cultural hegemony shared by readers, and thus one would assume Native Americans’ cultural hegemony differs from that shared by white mainstream readers. For example, unlike the audience for mainstream journalists in general, the culturally diverse audience of Native American journalists shares an ethnic designation but perhaps not one dominant cultural hegemony. That is, although other minority groups identify themselves as black Americans, Hispanic Americans, etc., Native Americans identify themselves by tribal associations, such as Navajo, Lakota, or Cheyenne, and not as Navajo American Indian, Lakota American Indian, and Cheyenne American Indian. Each of these tribes has its own
language, religion, myths, beliefs, values, folkways, mores, kinship, worldviews, art, music, housing, and dress. Nevertheless, Rachel Bonney has written, American Indians do share a culture based on a value system that stresses “brotherhood, kinship, sharing and generosity, lack of aggression and competition in interpersonal relationship, and a tendency to withdraw from conflict situations.” These values would make it difficult for American Indians to accept values of the dominant society that stress individuality, conflict/aggression to solve problems, and competition as a means to personal success.

To investigate whether news constructions in mainstream and Native American press coverage differs, research for this study explored coverage of the BIA occupation by two mainstream white newspaper, the New York Times and Washington Post, and three Native American newspapers, Akwesasne Notes, the Wassaja, and the Navajo Times.

**Background**

Led by spiritual leaders or medicine men with sacred pipes, caravans left from various points across the United States and represented a coalition of 250 of the country’s 300 tribes (Akwesasne Notes, Early Winter). Caravan organizers notified the Bureau of Indian Affairs officials that several hundred American Indians planned to converge on Washington in hopes of having Indian grievances addressed by authorities. As predicted, a four-mile long caravan arrived early in the morning of November 2. The reception was not warm. Officials refused to meet with the group and as the 5 p.m. closing time for most offices and businesses approached, participants realized that nothing would be accomplished that day. Upset by the stalling tactics of BIA officials, caravan participants decided to occupy the six-story granite building located at 1951 Constitution Avenue that had housed the BIA offices since 1965 and hold it until

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5 Bonney, Rachel, “The Role of AIM Leaders in Indian Nationalism,” *American Indian Quarterly* 3 (Autumn 1977): 211.
government officials listened to their demands. Thus began a seven-day occupation of the building.

“We were only in here talking to Bureau officials; there was no occupation at all. Then someone . . . called the riot squad and they just came in,” said Carter Camp, a Ponca and head of the Oklahoma American Indian Movement. Police and guards were pushed out of the building. Subsequently, police tried to retake the building by force. However, occupiers repelled the attack but not without several among them sustaining minor injuries.

Each tribal group claimed a room as its headquarters and the occupiers organized a security force to ensure the safety of the participants. Black civil rights organizations and local church groups donated truckloads of food and Indian Commissioner Louis Bruce spent one night with the occupiers to show his sympathy. Police cut all telephone lines to the building except the line that connected directly to the Department of the Interior. Each morning, a court order demanded the participants leave the building by 6 p.m. However, the American Indians defied each court order, vowing to remain until their demands were met.

Hopes for a peaceful end to the occupation arrived on Sunday night, Nov. 5, as caravan leaders and government officials worked out a proposal titled “Administration’s Final Offer and Ultimatum.” American Indians rejected the offer and subsequently declared the building the Native Indian embassy. Fed up with the slow negotiating process, the occupiers grew more enraged: “Hank Adams and his people (from Washington state) were adamant that we demolish the building rather than surrender,” Means wrote, “but most of AIM was against it because it was counterproductive strategically and from a public relations perspective.” Nevertheless, the BIA building was looted and trashed: “It pointed to a hatred on the part of many Indians for the

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6 Matthiessen, 54.  
7 Smith and Warrior, 157.  
8 Means, 222.
documents because they were documents, records that must be destroyed because of what they and the building that housed them represented.”

Finally, on November 6, the government agreed to create a task force to study the American Indian grievances and proposals that had been written prior to the going to Washington, D.C., and presented as the Twenty Points document to government officials. The White House agreed to formally respond to each of the 20 points within 30 days and would “recommend that there be no prosecution for the seizure and occupation of the BIA building.” The government also gave $66,000 to the Indians to pay for their transportation out of town along with a police escort. Occupiers began leaving the following day November 8 with the remaining holdouts leaving by November 8.

**Literature Review**

Press content, in addition to being viewed here as telling readers the news, is viewed as text that provides devices for processing the information. For example, even though journalists may rely on official sources and official definitions to maintain the illusion of objectivity when covering protest groups, such reliance contributes to certain framing of news that shape readers’ perceptions and understandings of the groups. To see if the same events were constructed differently in news accounts for the dominant U.S. audience and for Native Americans, coverage of the BIA occupation, instigated by Indian activists, was studied in two mainstream and three Native American newspapers. It was assumed that accounts in the three Native American newspapers would reflect a more positive image of American Indians than those in the mainstream newspaper. For example, it was expected that Native American newspapers might

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9 Smith and Warrior, 162.
10 Ibid., 163.
11 Matthiessen 54 and Means 235.
depict participants in the events as heroes but the mainstream newspaper might depict them as “enemies” or, at least, as threats.

Among many scholars who have defined news frames, Todd Gitlin calls framing the “persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion” that enables journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely and to package information for efficient relay to their audiences.\textsuperscript{12} A frame may be a central organizing idea or emphasis on a salient aspect of a story.\textsuperscript{13}

Simply by going about their profession, Gitlin says, reporters “systematically frame the news to be compatible with the main institutional arrangements of society. Furthermore, these frames are reproduced in terms derived from the dominant hegemony.”\textsuperscript{14} Kathleen Endres, also noting that media frames reflect the dominant norms, values, and culture of society, has written that “frames must be consistent with the values of the audience to be effective. Unless those values—social, economic, or cultural—are shared by the audience, the frames lose their organizing effectiveness.”\textsuperscript{15}

Framing in news accounts supplies a vocabulary for members of a society to think and talk about the pertinent issues while also limiting the scope of public discussions of those accounts. For example, studies of news stories about protests and deviant groups show that journalists have tended to focus on protesters’ appearances and to emphasize violent actions and conflicts between the police and protesters, and to ultimately downplay the effectiveness of the


\textsuperscript{14} Gitlin, 269-270.

Gitlin argued that news organizations deligitimized the 1960s student protest movement through a variety of framing devices, including trivialization of the movement, disparagement of its effectiveness, and characterization of the New Left as deviant. Journalists can convey social stability by consistently using words and images that maintain a constant meaning over time. Shoemaker said her study of coverage of American political groups lent “support to the theory that the media act as agents of social stability.”

Because journalists construct accounts to give salience to particular aspects, news stories present a particular view of reality based on journalists’ selections of what to emphasize, what to ignore, and what sources to use. “The media set the issue agenda for the rest of us, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress,” wrote Parenti. “The press can effectively direct our perceptions when we have little information to the contrary and when the message seems congruent with earlier notions about events. In this way, new information is a reinforcement of earlier perceptions.”

Through the use of framing devices, reporters can help shape a movement’s image because “frames can have significant consequences [for] how audiences perceive and understand issues,” according to Fuyuan Shen. News reportage can frame a protest in several ways: by ignoring it; burying news about it; focusing on events rather than the group’s goals; trivializing the protesters by ridiculing their dress, language, age, style, or goals, or by marginalizing viewpoints through associating them with social deviance.

Method

The research questions posed in this study are designed to ascertain how the *New York Times, Washington Post, Akwesasne Notes*, the *Wassaja* and *Navajo Times* framed their news stories of the takeover and occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Washington, D.C., November 1-7, 1972. The *Times, Akwesasne Notes*, and the *Wassaja* are all considered national newspapers while the *Post* and *Navajo Times* are considered local newspapers that serve more localized audiences. All news stories appearing from November 1 through November 10 were analyzed for this research. The following questions guided this research:

- What frames are identifiable in selected newspapers’ coverage of the occupation?
- What frames are identified of Native American participants and government participants?
- What frames of the protest are identifiable?
- Do frames in Native American newspaper coverage differ from those in the mainstream newspaper coverage? If so, how?

To identify frames in the coverage studied for this study, several procedures were used. These include the four framing categories identified by Parenti:

1. **Ineffective, Weak, Trivial.** This frame can result from reporting that ignores and undercounts the size of the protest.
2. **Participants are not to be taken seriously.** Reporting that favors participants’ opponents or never characterizes participants as numerous or dedicated can produce this frame.
3. **Disorganized Protesters.** This frame can be produced by reporting that omits or downplays protesters’ reasons for actions or suggests that protestors lack clear goals or are unable to articulate their goals.
4. **Insignificant, Marginal Event.** This frame can be produced in coverage that ignores the substance of a protest while emphasizing protesters’ appearances and using such terms as “militant,” “deviant,” or “unorganized” to describe protesters. Depicting protesters as violent or irrational also can produce this frame.

Similarly used as guides were some frames such as: contextualization (locating events in historical and political contexts) and trivialization (ignoring numbers of protestors while emphasizing their appearances or by describing them negatively and not quoting them as sources). Also noted were headlines of all news stories; leads of all news stories; language choices in descriptions of participants that give impressions, and sources that were quoted, directly and indirectly.

**Findings**

The events are framed in the mainstream newspaper as insignificant and marginal and the protest as ineffective and trivial. Native Americans are framed as not to be taken seriously, and U.S. government participants are framed as responsible and effective. Although coverage in *Wassaja* differs in some respects, the events were framed in the other two Native American newspapers as peaceful, spiritual undertakings and the protests as well-organized, purposeful; Native Americans were framed as active, purposeful and as champions for their race, while frames of non-Native Americans (U.S. government representatives) ranged simply as a presence to embodiment of power to opponent to trivial, and deceitful.

The *New York Times* coverage framed the BIA takeover as insignificant and marginal events, and the Native American newspapers framed the BIA takeover as a spiritual undertaking, quest for rights and peaceful protest. The *New York Times* reported the caravan as originally beginning as an organized body of buses, station wagons and cars traveling from the West Coast
to Washington, D.C., but said the caravan collected “adherents along the way” (November 7),
and described the BIA takeover as “a self-styled Trail of Broken Treaties” protest (November 9).
The term “militant” appears throughout New York Times coverage especially in numerous story
leads. Additional identifiers used in the New York Times coverage for Native Americans include
“the invading group” (November 3), “young activist Indians” and “defiant Indians” (November
4), “splinter group of militants” (November 7), and “trail of broken treaties protestors”
(November 8).

The first appearance of the term “militant” appeared in the Washington Post’s November
4 story. Subsequent stories labeled the occupiers as “several hundred heavily armed Indian
protestors” (November 7), and “the last of the hundreds of rebellious American Indians”
(November 9).

However, these are the few references used. Generally, the Post used the neutral term
“Indians.” In some cases, the Post provided more complimentary identifiers such as
“responsible and elected Indian leaders” (November 4), “leaders, mostly from the organized
American Indian Movement, are smooth and experienced” (a second November 4 story),
spiritual leader, Indians of the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan (November 6), and spokesmen
on several occasions. However, in the November 9 issue, the Post again re-emphasizes the
orderly, almost justified actions by the caravan participants by writing: “All Indians are seeking a
guarantee. Even the separatists favor massive federal funding to assure the preservation of
traditional Indian culture…” The story also provided a context for the protest.

A Spiritual Undertaking (in Native American Newspapers)

The caravan that eventually became known as “The Trail of Broken Treaties” was first
identified in Akwesasne Notes as an Indian pilgrimage, which served to represent “a spiritual
undertaking.” The formal name chosen for the caravan by the eight organizing groups was
“Trail of Broken Treaties and Pan American Native Quest for Justice,” as reported in the
Akwesasne Notes Early Winter issue and Navajo Times on October 26.

Navajo Times provided much more information for its readers by providing the purpose
of the caravan (“to remind elected officials of the common mistreatment of the American
Indian”) and the objective (“to shed light on the situation of Indian people in the Western
Hemisphere in a non-violent fashion”). Finally, the newspaper reported on the upcoming merger
of Canadian tribes with the American tribes before arriving in Washington, D.C., which would
give the caravan an “international flavor.” Further, the Navajo Times reported that the caravan
was “spearheaded by the high-powered American Indian Movement,” the only native newspaper
to do so.

Calling the caravan an “enterprise conceived as a spiritual undertaking,” Akwesasne
Notes reported (November 2) “everything had been carefully organized to make sure the event
came off well.” The report continued: “There was a specific list of Twenty Demands [and] there
was a week-long series of events all arranged.” However, the report blamed “the rats, the Army,
and the BIA building police” for changing the event into a building takeover, implying that the
takeover could have been prevented: “a decent reception by Washington officials would have
prevented the whole bad scene.” Emphasizing that the protest began as a spiritual undertaking
and not an intended takeover, the November 6 Akwesasne Notes reported: “The group followed
the Indian custom of acknowledging and giving thanks to all things of the Creation.”

The Wassaja coverage of the BIA takeover began with an introduction that the account to
follow “is the true story, as pieced together by ‘Wassaja’ reporters and the Indian demonstrators
themselves.” The caravan goal was a “peaceful protest against treatment of Indians, and a list of
20 demands were [sic] formulated. The organizers also prepared several documents of considerable factual importance” (emphasis added). The Indians occupied the building “in defense of their rights” and would make “makeshift weapons in defense, ‘if we had to’.”

**Frames of the Protests:**

Frames of the protests identified in the mainstream newspapers were of ineffectual, weak and trivial efforts, and the dominant frames identified in the three Native American newspapers were of a well organized, purposeful and a determined and strong effort that was peaceful. Another frame was of a disintegrating protest.

Although the very first *New York Times* story framed the protest as well organized, strong, and justifiable, a frame of it as weak and ineffectual ultimately dominated coverage in that newspaper. The lead in the first *New York Times* story on November 3 reported “American Indians protesting injustices took control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building after scuffles with the police outside and inside the building.” The next paragraph says demonstrators, many of whom brought bedrolls, sleeping bags, and other necessities, “held the policemen back” after the initial takeover of the building. The fourth paragraph describes the leaders as “bent on emphasizing the rights of Indians as the first Americans.” However, in the seventh paragraph, the protest is reported as an uncontrollable outburst because the participants “abandoned a program laid out by their leaders.”

The *New York Times* also ignored or undercounted the size and reporting varying sizes from the very first reports. For example, on November 3 the *New York Times* reported that “about 500 American Indians” took control of the BIA office in Washington, D. C., the previous day (November 2); participants included an unspecified number of “women and about two dozen children.”
Both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* lacked coverage of the Native Americans’ demands, which helped frame both protests as weak and ineffectual and the protesters as disorganized. Although the first day of the *Times* coverage reported that the Indians came to the nation’s capital for a week-long “protest against broken treaties and failure of the Government to carry out trust responsibilities,” it mentioned only briefly the Twenty Points document in summarized excerpts. In coverage that seems to favor the U.S. government as the responsibly behaving party in settling the dispute, the *Times* gave much attention to the final pact.

The coverage in the *Washington Post* varied from day to day. The list of 20 demands is mentioned in most stories but later trivialized these protest by stating that “the details of the demands are complex but a number of interviews…showed that emotions underlying them are simple.” However, in the November 4 story, the *Post* gave the protest meaning by reporting that 400 protesting Indians who vowed to remain until their demands for “self-determination” are met.

While the *Post* used the term “militant” in describing the protesters in few stories, the reporters did use other identifiers that downplayed the importance of the protest, calling Russell Means a protest coordinator, disparate groups offering support, and “mood the Indian protestors had been restrictive but orderly.”

**Frames of the Protest in Native American Newspapers:**

The three Native American newspapers generally framed the protests as well organized and controlled, but a rare competing frame in the *Wassaja* was of the BIA takeover as disorganized, insignificant and marginal. “There is no doubt in the mind of this reporter that. . .the leaders of the action lost control of what was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration.” The
Wassaja did not report on either the Twenty Points or details of the final peace pact thus slighting reasons for the protest.

Akwesasne Notes and the Navajo Times gave detailed descriptions of the initial organization the protest by providing updates from the caravan’s beginning stages to the arrival in Washington, D.C. Both newspapers reported numbers of people joining the caravans, starting points, leaders of each leg of the caravan, organizational sponsorship, and the complete Twenty Points document.

The protest frame of purposeful, determined, and strong is attributable, in part, to reports of the scope of Native American involvement emphasized in Akwesasne Notes and the Navajo Times. For example, in the Late Autumn issue of Akwesasne Notes, editors projected that the caravan would “bring thousands of native people” to Washington, D.C. The next issue—Early Winter 1972—contains stories from various locations throughout the United States that gave numbers of expected caravan participants. Locations and numbers of participants included: Denver, Colo., where it was reported that about 50 Indians from eight Indian organizations gathered to work out details for the caravan; Wounded Knee, S.D., where “about 300 Indians [were] traveling in an 85 car caravan;” Ponca, Okla., where “about 80 people [were] traveling in 20 cars”; Topeka, Kan., where, it was reported, “about 200 persons gathered;” Mankato, Minn., “about 300 people;” Minneapolis, Minn.; “about 100 people and Pembroke, N.C., “a group of 150.”

After the caravan arrived in Washington, D.C., the November 2 story reported “several thousand Indians were already” there with “about 2,000 more expected.” In addition, “hundreds of Caravan people” went to the BIA office and, eventually, “there were hundreds of Indians milling around” including “150 strong men in here” and “about 100 younger children.” Specific
numbers did appear in some stories including “two Indian war heroes” and “20 people [who] had prepared the food for occupiers.”

Numbers of the non-Native Americans involved were found only once in *Akwesasne Notes* when the November 9 edition reported “an estimated 100 U. S. marshals were flown” in to help keep order. In the *Wassaja*, general terms were used to describe numbers for both sides—Indians and representatives of the U.S. government.

The *Navajo Times* also provided advance stories: on Oct. 19 when the caravan made a stop in Gallup, N.M. to “gather up support” and reported that the caravan “will stop in 8875 major cities to bring attention to the protest. On Oct. 26, the *Navajo Times* again ran a story about how the caravan “continued to gather steam” and the planned merger with the Canadian tribes along with naming various Indian groups participating “in the trek across America.” In addition, the newspaper provided a map showing where each caravan began and other details that happened along the route.

However, this changed as the protest turned more violent. On November 2, the newspaper “warned that the BIA take-over will not weaken the sovereignty of the Navajo Nation, nor abrogate the federal government’s responsibilities to the Navajo people…. This is reinforced with the publication of a tribal council resolution on November 30 that “supports the Inter-Agency Task Force and commends the strenuous effort of officials to avoid violence and bloodshed and the commitment of those officials to create a positive and constructive agreement out of a potential tragic and disastrous (sic) situation.”

Frames of Participants:

Frames of Native American participants in the mainstream newspaper were as protesters not to be taken seriously, and frames of U.S. government representatives were as responsible,
effective, organized, unified, stable, orderly individuals who were in charge. Frames of Native Americans in the three Native American newspapers were of active, purposeful people who were champions of their race. Frames of the U.S. government ranged from a mere presence to embodiment of power (in control, in charge), to opponent to trivial and deceitful.

References to federal officials, Interior Department officials, security forces, White House officials, and other Administrations officials appeared throughout all articles read in all newspapers. *New York Times* coverage framed the U.S. government favorably, and the three Native American newspapers, not surprisingly, framed Native Americans favorably. Identifiers used for participating groups reveal the frames. Although many terms in the *New York Times* seem neutral—for example, “federal officials,” “government officials,” “spokesmen” for various governmental departments—adjectives applied to Native Americans in the same stories point up such “neutral” terms as part of positively framing the U.S. government. That is, Native Americans are framed as not to be taken seriously, which, by default, helps frame the government as responsible and effective. For example, throughout the seven-day period, two adjectives—“militant” and “deviant”—and three nouns—“militants,” “demonstrators” and “protestors”—referred to Native Americans in all *New York Times* stories. The November 7 *New York Times* provides an example of favorably framing the U.S. government that also revealed in the way Native Americans are covered. The report lists names of all the federal officials involved in negotiating the final agreement but names only the leading Indian negotiator. The remaining eight Indian negotiators were not named or even mentioned. Again, by default, the government is framed as the effective, responsible-acting party.

In *New York Times* stories, quoting government speakers also framed them as behaving responsibly. For example, the November 3 story, indirectly quoting Louis R. Bruce, the Indian
Affairs Commissioner, said he “expressed hope” about ending the takeover and later “sought to reassure” others the negotiations would be successful. The story reported that Harrison E. Loesch, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, and other administration officials promised to “explore” every possible avenue for negotiations. However, the Indians “shouted back” at him.

The *Washington Post* framed the marshals as being in control because “a force of hundreds of riot-equipped police” provided a shield between the protestors and the streets of Washington, D.C. Also, in the November 4 story, the newspaper reported that the “marshals instructed the protestors.”

The *Post* varied the frames used for the protestors from a group in control to a group divided. On November 3, a story reported that “keeping with the effort to maintain control of the situation, leaders directed and demonstrators obeyed” and later, the Indian leadership was “still amazed at the hostile attitude of government officials. The mood of the Indian protestors had been restrictive but orderly.” On November 4, the newspaper reported that a temporary restraining order issued that day “had the backing of a number of responsible and elected Indian leaders” and “their leaders, mostly from the organized American Indian Movement, are smooth and experienced.” A second story that day described the “emotional afternoon meeting” and how hundreds of young Indians “share the exuberance of racial pride and anger over the age-old suffering of their peoples….”

On November 7, the lead reported “Several hundred heavily armed Indian protestors retained control of the BIA for a fifth consecutive day and…had vowed to fight to the death.” The story also described details of how protestors will defend the building: “Two Indians carrying what appeared to be powerful bows and a number of arrows went to the roof…while others positioned themselves inside windows, holding fire hoses. (Others) formed a 100-man
security line in front of the building.” In addition, the Post brought up another possible faction between the protestors by reporting that a younger Indian had denounced the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association as “a government-backed Indian organization that includes many old Indian tribal chiefs…” (By the way, no name, age or tribal affiliation is given to the speaker of this direct quote.) And, on November 9, the Post reported that “Claiming proudly that they have ‘changed the course of history,’ the last of hundreds of rebellious American Indians vacated” the BIA offices but some claim the damage was done by “older, angrier Indians” and “AIM supporters who had laid siege to the BIA structure.”

Native American participants were framed in the Wassaja, Akwesasne Notes, and Navajo Times as active, purposeful, determined and champions of their race, while non-Native American participants (U.S. government representatives) were framed as simply a presence, embodiment of power, opponent, trivial. Identifiers of Native Americans in coverage are consistently more sympathetic than those for government entities. For example, the November 4 Akwesasne Notes story calls Native Americans “champions of the distraught Indian man.” And, although “the Indians” appeared most often in Wassaja references to the protesters, others included “the organizers,” “leaders,” “committee and/or organizers of the cavalcade,” “a group of Indians,” “the Indian demonstrators,” and “those occupying the BIA building.”

Akwesasne Notes and the Navajo Times both used specific tribal names following identification of a source for quotes or in identifying a person taking some type of action. The newspaper identified John Trudell as a “Lakotah,” Peter LaPointe as “a Winnebago from Nebraska,” Carter Camp as “a Ponca,” “a young Iroquois man,” and “a 25-year-old Mohawk” and Jerry Rogers, a 28-year-old Chippewa. Specific tribe names did not appear in the Wassaja coverage. Frames of the U.S. government—the opposing side—as simply a presence appears in
such references in Wassaja coverage as “the White House,” “White House officials,” and “federal officials.”

A frame of the government as an opponent appears in references in Wassaja coverage to “the guards” in several instances and in the Akwesasne Notes reference to a “growing federal army.” The frame also appears in the Wassaja report: “a group of Indians” had taken over the BIA building and that “four of them [Indians] were beaten by the guards.” At another point, the same story reported that “a large group of non-Indians (largely college students and sympathizers)” had formed a human chain around the building [to hold opponents at bay].

The frame of the U.S. government as embodiment of power appears in Akwesasne Notes coverage. Despite many general terms for Non-Native American participants, most identifiers after first mention in the November 3 Akwesasne Notes, framed U. S. government representatives negatively. General identifiers, in addition to those mentioned earlier, included “senior government officials” and “lower echelons of the Interior and Justice Departments.” But other terms framed the U.S. government as embodiments of power: “crew of helmeted, armored and heavily armed guards.”

Frames of the government forces as trivial appear in the November 2 article in Akwesasne Note. The riot police were described as “looking like something from outer space.” In addition, coverage referred to government officials’ attitudes as “two-faced attitudes of senior government officials” and described Harrison Loesch as “being patronizing” to the caravan participants. The term “the organ grinders” appeared in the November 6 story and was used to refer to Interior Secretary Rogers Morton, Frank Carlucci of the Office of Budget and Management, and Leonard Garment, minority affairs advisor to Nixon aide John Ehrlichman.
New York Times coverage stressed physical descriptions of Native Americans but rarely described government representatives’ appearance. For example, the New York Times reported that several participants had “smeared their faces with lipstick in simulation of war paint” [The reference to the war paint in Akwesasne Notes, on the other hand, connoted Native American pride and culture: “young men stripped to the waist, painted their chests and wore their armbands and necklaces.”] The Washington Post also reported the incident differently: “While tribal drums reverberated through the long halls of the building, the Indians began again to battle the white man.” The newspaper also reported there was “much joking but anger and disbelief” among the participants. The participants “stripped to the waist, bedecked themselves in armbands and necklaces. Older men wore fewer markings and whooped less.” But one exchange reported between two Indian youths echoed the New York Times: “What did you use?” asked one youth. “Lipstick. I forgot my paint,” replied the second youth.

And, finally, a note on the 20 points document that was mostly ignored by the two mainstream newspapers. Akwesasne Notes printed the entire document in one issue of the newspaper while the Navajo Times printed a synopsis of the document. The two mainstream newspapers both made specific references to the document but provided brief one or two sentence explanations, which were buried deep within the stories.

Conclusion

It was assumed that differences would be found, based on theories of the social construction of reality and hegemony—both of which suggest media constructions are culture-bound. However, because of the centuries-long efforts to impose on Native Americans “white” mainstream values, there was some expectation that the Native American press might contain, at
least to some extent, constructions seen in white mainstream newspapers. In short, the research shows different constructions that seem attributable to cultural differences.

Significantly, the findings suggest that Native American coverage contained images of a reality that would seem to communicate to Native Americans, regardless of tribal affiliation. And an overall message in the coverage portrays Native Americans as struggling to gain control of their destiny because this differs from usual messages about Native Americans as primarily being oppressed by whites.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage framed U.S. government representative as responsible, effective, organized, unified, stable orderly individuals who were in charge. Both newspapers depicted the U. S. government as behaving responsibly. The government was reported as having attempted to correct wrongs inflicted on Native Americans across time, and as offering peaceful solutions to end the standoff.

Native American protestors were framed as not to be taken seriously. The occupation was constructed as beginning as a justified protest that quickly turned into a disorganized event. This construction gives an image of the protest group as inept, and the frames evoke—and are abetted by—some long-held myths. In particular, the *Times* coverage conveyed vivid images of [Wild West] Indians on a rampage breaking furniture to use as “makeshift” weapons. These constructions would seem to reinforce an image in the dominant white culture of whooping, savage Indians on the warpath. The overall impact was likely negative in that readers probably viewed Native Americans and the protest as pernicious.

Both mainstream newspapers trivialized and marginalized the event also by ignoring the substance of the protest. Some details of what led to the occupations appeared deep (some would say they were “buried”) in the stories. For example, the summary of the “20 Points”
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document appeared in the second-to-last paragraph of the November 3 New York Times edition and gave only three of the 20 provisions. A more detailed list was published in the next day’s story but was still only a summary.

Further, white mainstream readers would not learn from such coverage what the Native Americans sought to gain from this protest. Lacking such information, readers were left to speculate and “fit” the protests into a dominant myth of “Indians on the warpath.” Also, readers would not learn from coverage the reasons for the takeover and might therefore believe the American Indians were not justified in their actions.

Akwesasne Notes, the Wassaja and the Navajo Times all framed the occupation positively, as a “spiritual undertaking” that was well-organized, purposeful, and a peaceful event that was thwarted by the U.S. government and Native American participants were framed as a strong and determined people embarking on a pilgrimage to right long-standing wrongs. Native American participants were also framed as not having intended the caravan to turn into a protest. The U.S. government was framed as responsible for it becoming a protest. The Wassaja reported that Native Americans only intended to bring the plight of American Indians to national attention, and they took over the building in defense of their rights.

The frames of the U.S. government in the three Native American newspapers’ coverage ranged from a mere presence to embodiment of power to opponents to trivial and deceitful adversaries. Neutral identifiers of government representatives in all newspapers tended to frame the government as a mere presence. Such identifiers included government “spokesmen,” “officials,” “U.S. marshals,” and “FBI agents.”

Of course, findings from only three Native American newspapers cannot be generalized to other Native American newspapers or the Indian population as a whole; and findings from
only two mainstream newspapers certainly cannot be generalized to other mainstream newspapers. However, the findings are important because they are very suggestive, and they indicate avenues meriting further research.

Regarding the differences in views circulated surrounding a conflict, one might argue that spokesmen for different sides in any conflict inevitably support one side over the other. However, news media are expected to report events and not to take sides. The fact that alternative and ethnic newspapers exist in America suggests that news media are not completely detached, especially when reporting conflicts in which cultural values clash or differ considerably. If Native Americans were assimilated into American culture, there would be less need for Native American newspapers. Given the theories of social construction of reality and hegemony, it seems fair to argue that, as long as various ethnic newspapers exist in American culture, the question about constructions of events and issues in newspapers serving primarily cultures based in different values remains important.
**Bibliography**

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