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**Author**

Hickman, John

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# COVID-19 and New Mexico Daily Newspaper Coverage of Native American Government Elected Leaders

*John Hickman*

## INTRODUCTION

Native American government elected leaders typically contend with daunting problems rooted in systemic inequality, in particular the inadequate provision of medical care.<sup>1</sup> The Indian Health Service, which serves roughly 2.6 million people in thirty-seven states, is plagued by “shortages of funding and supplies, a lack of doctors and nurses, too few hospital beds and aging facilities.”<sup>2,3</sup> The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic exposed these problems anew.<sup>4</sup> As with recent respiratory disease pandemics, COVID-19 resulted in disproportionately high infection rates and deaths among Native Americans and Alaska Natives.<sup>5</sup> Elected officials in all governments rely on news organizations—print, broadcast, and digital—to communicate with their constituents, and the content of the news stories produced by those organizations shapes public perceptions of elected officials.<sup>6</sup> News coverage that names Native American government elected leaders also reinforces their standing as significant decision-makers in intergovernmental relationships with counterparts in non-Native federal, state, and local governments.<sup>7</sup>

This article investigates how the pandemic altered news coverage of Native American national and tribal presidents and Pueblo governors in New Mexico’s daily newspapers. The answer matters for two reasons. First, despite competition from broadcast and digital media, news coverage in daily newspapers continues to be

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JOHN HICKMAN is professor of political science at Berry College, where he teaches international relations and comparative politics. He is the author of *Selling Guantánamo: Exploding the Propaganda Surrounding America’s Most Notorious Military Prison* (2013).

essential news media. Print journalists are often the first to recognize and report an important news story, which is later picked up by broadcast and digital journalists. As Martin J. Lang notes, the legacy print news sources “continue to cover complex local news stories with more breadth and depth over time than local television, radio, and Internet-based stories.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, Native Americans have been subjected to erasure in news coverage just as they generally have been in the culture of the United States. The failure to name Native American government elected leaders represents yet another form of epistemic violence via discursive “othering,” their silencing reminding less powerful Native Americans that their voices have little chance of being heard nor their interests recognized.<sup>9</sup> Reporting of public-policy issues involving Native American governments and populations that names Native American government decision-makers mitigates such erasure. Thus, according to one commentator, the press attention given to Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland is the “most visible reminder that Native people are still here.”<sup>10</sup> There is more to erasure than simply the failure to name. Erasure can also take the forms of deflection, decontextualization, misrepresentation, and tokenization.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, however, failure to name is the most basic manifestation.

This article reports empirical findings from a content analysis in eight of New Mexico’s largest-circulation daily newspapers for the period eighteen months before to eighteen months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Data collected from 1,314 articles naming Native American governmental presidents and governors were analyzed. What the results reveal is both a laudable overall increase in reporting during the pandemic as well as a less commendable elaboration of the prepandemic pattern of coverage across the state’s Indigenous nations, tribes, and pueblos. Although several of the state’s dailies rose to the occasion, others failed. Arguably, even those dailies that increased their coverage during the pandemic tended to engage in erasure via denial of difference.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Whether government decision-makers are named matters for several reasons. The most obvious is that being named as an official source tends to reinforce legitimate authority in the perception of both the public and other decision-makers. Much of the power of decision-makers resides in their ability to persuade, and news organizations serve as the means by which those decision-makers may reach their intended audiences.

Legacy print news media share the networking capacity of social media in that they connect communities and inspire collective action, which occur as elected officials and other elites frame and present public-policy issues.<sup>12</sup> This becomes crucial, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, when the public must be persuaded to accept the reality of a specific risk and to change behavior to reduce the risk. Native American print news sources provided crucial information where other print news sources may have failed. For example, the daily *Navajo Times* has a circulation of 22,800.<sup>13</sup> Although owned by the Navajo Nation, it is editorially independent. As a probable consequence, it may suffer less from the disinterest or distrust that limits audiences for local government

news sources.<sup>14</sup> Navajo broadcast and digital news provided crucial information where print news may have failed. One example is New Mexico PBS broadcast *New Mexico's Tribal Communities and COVID-19: A Virtual Town Hall*, whose participants included then member of the United States House of Representatives Deb Haaland, New Mexico governor Michelle Lujan, four New Mexico state officials, Navajo Nation president Jonathan Nez, and All Pueblo Council of Governors representative Wilfred Herrera Jr.<sup>15</sup> Although television remains a crucial news medium for many Americans, the effective “reach” of PBS news programming is limited by the typically higher levels of income and education of its viewers. Digital platforms such as YouTube also provided information during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>16</sup> Independent broadcast and digital news media sources such as *Democracy Now* also brought much-needed attention to the crisis.<sup>17</sup>

The historical tendency is for both official sources and social groups to displace ordinary individuals in news coverage.<sup>18</sup> Government officials tend to be named more often than other official sources when the reporting is about risk.<sup>19</sup> However, some categories of government officials are more likely to be named and quoted than others because of the patterns developed in regular news beats. As Timothy E. Cook observed about reliance on official sources in regular news beats, “We must look not only for the news it makes possible but for the news it discourages.”<sup>20</sup> The erasure via underreporting of Native Americans, their governments, and their decision-makers is attributable in part to the absence of a regular news beat “in the American legacy press devoted solely to covering the country’s 573 tribal nations.”<sup>21</sup>

The Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) published the results of two relevant content analyses. The *Reading Red Report 2002* revealed that national newspaper coverage of Native Americans focused on three stories: mascot team names, casino gambling, and “life on the res.”<sup>22</sup> The 2007 follow-up NAJA *Reading Red Report* content analysis of ten newspapers, including eight dailies and two weeklies, in cities with large Native American populations found that the tone of reporting was mostly neutral toward Native Americans.<sup>23</sup> Roughly one-fifth of the stories analyzed were positive in tone while slightly more than one-twentieth were negative. The *Albuquerque Journal*, whose reporting is part of this study, was also in the 2007 NAJA report sampling frame and accounted for the largest number of news stories, followed by the *San Diego Union Tribune*.<sup>24</sup> Rather than the mascot team names, casino gambling, and “life on the res” stories, arts and entertainment, education, and health dominated the news coverage in the *Albuquerque Journal*. Most relevant with regard to the problem of journalistic silencing, the 2007 report notes that the majority of stories, 63.8 percent, cited no Native American sources.<sup>25</sup>

Martin J. Lang’s qualitative content analysis of news coverage of Native American casino gaming in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 2002 and 2003 revealed that the economic and social benefits for and harms incurred by Native Americans were largely ignored.<sup>26</sup> Of greatest relevance for the purposes of this study, the reporting examined in Lang’s study relied heavily on non-Native government official sources.<sup>27</sup> This silencing of Native American decision-makers denies the agency of

Native American governments and reduces the policy discourse to that in non-Native American state government decision-making.

Marked disparities in reporting occur even where Native Americans are a large percentage of news consumers. Based on a qualitative comparative analysis of television news coverage in Hawaii and New Mexico, Don Heider notes the privileging of events in urban areas relative to remote locations like Pueblos, with the latter described as geopolitical “landscapes of exclusion.”<sup>28</sup> He attributes this disparity to the higher cost of transportation from urban television newsrooms to rural locations and to the failure of journalists to develop trust among Native Americans. Erasure via denial of difference may also explain some of the disparity. Identity is found in cultural difference and historical experience. The erasure of difference happens when journalists report events that involve some Native American and Alaska Native nations, tribes, pueblos, and villages as representing all other Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

Native American governments have unique relationships with the United States as well as important relationships with other Native American governments and with state and local governments. Other decision-makers are also an important news audience.<sup>29</sup> Decision-makers take note when their counterparts are named or quoted by the press, which may be interpreted as a measure of relative influence. As politics involves both competition and cooperation among decision-makers, frequency of news coverage provides a rough indicator of which decision-makers merit the greatest attention. To be named and quoted enhances a decision-maker’s power to command consultation, accommodation, and concession from other decision-makers.<sup>30</sup>

New Mexico’s Native American governments vary in their public relations capacity. The Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President,<sup>31</sup> Navajo Nation Council,<sup>32</sup> and Navajo Nation Washington Office<sup>33</sup> each issue their own press releases. The Hopi Tribe has an Office of Public Relations,<sup>34</sup> while the Mescalero Apache Tribe and the Pueblo of Zuni have staff members who serve as public relations officers in addition to their other roles. Most Pueblo governments, however, lack public relations offices or individual public relations officers, and instead conduct public relations through their governor’s offices. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have resulted in partial staffing of every unit of these governments.

Although New Mexico’s Native American government presidents and governors have the capacity to communicate with community members via their governments’ own media outlets and face-to-face conversation, news coverage in the state’s daily newspapers is nonetheless valuable for reinforcing messages to community members and signaling their relative importance to other decision-makers.

## CONTEXT

New Mexico’s Native American governments are primarily concentrated in the state’s northwestern quarter. With a territory approximately as large as West Virginia, the Navajo Nation covers 27,000 square miles of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Covering much of San Juan County and McKinley County in New Mexico, the Navajo Nation also includes contiguous and exclave territory in Rio Arriba County,

Sandoval County, Bernalillo County, and Cibola County. The territory of the Jicarilla Apache Nation is located in Rio Arriba County and Sandoval County. The Pueblos are located in Taos County, Rio Arriba County, Bernalillo County, Valencia County, and McKinley County. Although the territory of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Reservation extends into San Juan County, most of its territory and population are in Colorado. The territory of the Mescalero Apache Tribe is in the south-southeastern portion of New Mexico, within Otero and Lincoln counties roughly equidistant from the cities of Las Cruces, Roswell, and Carlsbad. The population of the Fort Sill Apache Tribe is primarily in Oklahoma, but in 2011 the tribe established a small reservation near Deming, New Mexico.<sup>35</sup> According to the 2010 US census, the Native American population of New Mexico was 138,762, including 65,764 Navajos (47.4 percent of the total); 6,867 members of two Apache tribes (5 percent of the total); and 66,161 members of nineteen Pueblo communities (47.6 percent of the total).<sup>36</sup>

Three of the newspapers in this study—*Albuquerque Journal*, *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, and *Santa Fe New Mexican*—have played important roles in the history of New Mexico since it was a US territory.<sup>37</sup> The *Albuquerque Journal* is the daily for the largest city in New Mexico. Albuquerque dwarfs the other municipalities of New Mexico, with a total population more than five times larger than the next largest municipality, Las Cruces.<sup>38</sup> Albuquerque also has the largest Native American population of any municipality in the state, comprising nearly 4 percent of its population.<sup>39</sup> The *Albuquerque Journal* has a paid circulation of more than 70,000.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the *Albuquerque Journal*, with its statewide circulation, news audiences in the northwest part of the state are served by the *Farmington Daily Times*, the *Gallup Independent*, and the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. Native Americans comprise almost 27 percent of the population of Farmington and more than 40 percent of the population of Gallup.<sup>41</sup> The *Daily Times* and *Gallup Independent* have paid circulations of more than 16,000 and more than 17,000, respectively.<sup>42</sup> Although affluent Santa Fe celebrates Pueblo culture and history, Native Americans comprise slightly less than 2 percent of the city's population.<sup>43</sup> The population of small Taos to its north is more than 5 percent Native American.<sup>44</sup> The *Santa Fe New Mexican* has a paid circulation of more than 28,000.<sup>45</sup>

Local news audiences in the south are served by the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, *Roswell Daily Record*, *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, and *Alamogordo Daily News*. Native Americans comprise less than 1 percent of the respective populations of Las Cruces, Carlsbad, and Alamogordo, and slightly more than 1 percent of the population of Roswell.<sup>46</sup> The *Las Cruces Sun-News*, *Roswell Daily Record*, *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, and *Alamogordo Daily News* each has a paid circulation that ranges between 6,000 and 9,000.<sup>47</sup>

## HYPOTHESIS

The literature review and context suggest several hypotheses about possible change in the news coverage of Native American government presidents and governors with the COVID-19 pandemic. First, given the increased risk associated with the pandemic and the tendency of journalists to look to government leaders as official sources when the news story involves risk, together with the pandemic's disproportionate impact on

Native Americans, it is reasonable to anticipate that the total number of news stories naming and/or mentioning Native American government presidents and governors increased relative to the prepandemic.<sup>48</sup> Increased naming and mentioning would reflect the greater impact of the pandemic on Native communities.<sup>49</sup>

Second, news coverage of New Mexico's Native American government presidents and governors were distributed in approximate proportion to the size of Native populations. Multiple potential equitable distributions of news coverage may be conceived. Disaggregating the twenty-two tribal-Pueblo populations into their discrete units suggests the following percentages of the total Native population of New Mexico: 47.4 percent Navajo, 4.5 percent Ohkay Owingeh, 8.0 percent Santa Clara, 3.0 percent Taos, 3.0 percent Sandia, 2.9 percent Laguna, 2.6 percent Mescalero, 2.3 percent Jicarilla, 2.3 percent Kewa, 2.3 percent Nambé, 2.3 percent Pojoaque, 2.5 percent San Felipe, 2.4 percent Isleta, 2.1 percent Acoma, 1.3 percent Jemez, 1.3 percent Picuris, 1.2 percent Cochiti, 1.2 percent San Ildefonso, 0.69 percent Tesuque, 0.05 percent Zia, 0.05 percent Zuni, and 0.04 percent Santa Ana. Alternatively, aggregation suggests percentages of 47.4 percent Navajo, 5 percent Apache, and 47.6 percent Pueblo. Another complication is that, unlike other Native American governments in New Mexico, the territory and population of the Navajo Nation encompass parts of two other states, Arizona and Utah. Based on the total Navajo Nation population in all three states of 173,776, yet a third set of percentages may be calculated: 70.4 percent Navajo, 3.9 percent Apache, and 26.8 percent Pueblo. As will be shown in findings, recognizing that there are three different potential equitable distributions is sufficient to test the second hypothesis.

Third, governors of Pueblo governments conducting competitive elections were named more often than their counterparts in pueblos that are not. The Navajo Nation, the Mescalero Apache Tribe, and the Jicarilla Apache Nation, together with Santa Clara Pueblo, Isleta Pueblo, Laguna Pueblo, and Zuni Pueblo, are governed under constitutions that were written in response to the provisions of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, a model inspired by the US federal government that prescribes separation of powers and competitive elections and which has resulted in procedures whereby governors are either popularly elected or selected by popular elected councils.<sup>50</sup> Picuris Pueblo, Nambé Pueblo, Pojoaque Pueblo, and San Ildefonso Pueblo also conduct competitive elections, while the remaining pueblos continue to adhere to a dual system that accommodates some modern procedures while also manifesting aspects of traditional internal Indigenous self-governance whose decision-making methods may seem opaque to outsiders, a complex arrangement that in effect appoints an "outer government" of civil officials.<sup>51</sup> The "one-size-fits-all" approach to governance is recognized as a possible source of mischief for local governments and private firms because it may run roughshod over tradition, scale, and the flexibility demanded by unique conditions.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of competitive elections in some pueblos, there may be both less need and less desire to cultivate press attention.

Fourth, because geographic proximity is a conventional indicator of newsworthiness, especially for local newspapers, news coverage of Native American government presidents and governors in local newspapers reflected proximity of the municipality of the daily newspaper in which the news story is published relative to the territories of

Native American governments. Although this feature of newsworthiness did not affect the distribution of news coverage in the *Albuquerque Journal* (whose scope of coverage is generally statewide), the mission to report local events translated into more frequent news coverage of tribal leaders in the *Farmington Daily Times*, *Gallup Independent*, and *Santa Fe New Mexican* than in the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, *Roswell Daily Record*, *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, and *Alamogordo Daily News*. However, these four last named dailies covered the Mescalero Apache Tribe's president more often than his or her tribal executive counterparts given the close proximity of those news organizations' respective circulations to the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The investigation gathered all of the news stories reported by eight of the ten largest daily newspapers in New Mexico from eighteen months before to eighteen months after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020—i.e., from September 1, 2019, to August 30, 2021. March 1, 2020, was selected as the inflection point between the *before* pandemic and *during* pandemic periods because that date marks the midpoint, roughly, of the Navajo Nation's activation of an emergency response on February 25 and the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation on March 17. Data were collected from a total of 1,314 news articles generated by NewsBank in online searches of the first name and surname of presidents and governors for the twenty-two Native American governments as addressed or mentioned in news stories in the *Albuquerque Journal*, *Farmington Daily Times*, *Gallup Independent*, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Las Cruces Sun-News*, *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, and *Alamogordo Daily News*. News coverage of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and Fort Sill Apache Tribe were excluded from the analysis. Members of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe are largely residents of or live near Towaoc, Colorado, and no articles mentioning Ute Mountain Ute Tribe chairman Manuel Heart were published in the eight New Mexico daily newspapers during the time frame of the study. The Fort Sill Apache Tribe possess acreage outside Deming, New Mexico, but appear to have no resident population on that property.<sup>53</sup> For comparative purposes, data were also collected from another 3,208 news articles naming the municipal mayors of the cities in which these newspapers are published, applying the same data collection protocol, i.e., by tallying the total number of news articles mentioning a mayor or executive officer before and during the pandemic together with the total number of mentions per article. Each instance of the full name was coded as one mention. Each use of the surname alone which followed use of the full name was coded as one mention, provided that the context made clear that it referred to that person and not to another person with the same surname.

Thus, if "Jonathan Nez" appeared once in an article and "Nez" appeared nine more times in the article, the number of name mentions for that article would be coded as "ten." After the initial mention of the first name and surname, subsequent mentions were typically only to the surname. Instances of family members of presidents and governors named in articles were not counted as mentions. Mentions in duplicate news articles generated by the search, with identical or nearly identical article titles together



with the same number of words and the same date, were excluded. However, articles bearing similar but not identical titles with different numbers of words or different dates were treated as different articles, and hence data were collected from them. Articles naming and mentioning more than one chief executive were extremely rare. Data also were collected on the number of news articles referencing the pandemic by using the words “pandemic,” “coronavirus,” “COVID-19,” “lockdown” or “CARES Act.” The CARES Act is legislation distributing economic relief, including from the effects of the pandemic, to states as well as to local and Native American governments.<sup>54</sup>

Collected data were organized in five tables with columns indicating the numbers of articles before and during the pandemic, the number of articles involving the pandemic, and the number of mentions before and during the pandemic. These included both the total numbers and percentages. Also reported were changes in percentages, whether increases or decreases, with respect to the figures from before the start of the pandemic compared to afterward.

## RESULTS

Examination of the figures reported in Table 1 shows increases in both (1) the number of news articles naming Navajo, Apache, and Pueblo government presidents and governors since the start of the pandemic and (2) the number of mentions of those tribal executive officers within the articles. These changes in percentages represent double-digit increases with respect to the number of articles as well as the number of mentions within articles.

The largest increases were observed for Apache and Pueblo presidents and governors. However, the results of the investigation also reveal that the Navajo Nation president received the lion’s share of news coverage for all Native American government presidents and governors, with more than 95.8 percent of the articles before and 92 percent during the pandemic. The number of news articles specifically referencing the pandemic and the number of mentions within such articles reflect a similar disproportionality. The figures exceed the hypothesized 47.48 percent share of news coverage.

The figures displayed in Table 2 show the total number of articles, total number of mentions in articles, percentages of articles and mentions, and percentage change from the period before the pandemic to the period since the start of the pandemic for Navajo Nation presidents across the eight newspapers in this study. For nearly all of the pre-pandemic period and for all of the period since the start of the pandemic, Jonathan Nez served as Navajo Nation president. Table 2 reveals that the bulk of news coverage before the pandemic appeared in two dailies in the northwest part of New Mexico, the *Gallup Independent* and the *Farmington Daily Times*. Together these two dailies accounted for 61.6 percent and 29.2 percent, respectively, of all articles and 66.6 percent and 28.1 percent, respectively, of all mentions. Combined, they account for 90.8 percent of all articles and 94.7 percent of all mentions. In contrast, percentages of articles and mentions in the other six newspapers before the pandemic were all in the single digits.

TABLE 1  
NEWS COVERAGE OF NATIVE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT PRESIDENTS  
AND GOVERNORS

	Number of Articles before Pandemic (and % of All Such articles)	Number of Articles during Pandemic (and % of all such articles)	Number of Articles Mentioning Pandemic (and % of all such articles)	Number of Mentions of Native American Government Chief Executives before Pandemic (and % of all such mentions)	Number of Mentions of Native American Government Chief Executives During Pandemic (and % of all such mentions)
Navajo Nation president	534 (95.8%)	697 (92%—an increase of 30.52%)	496 (95.1%)	1,884 (96.3%)	2,261 (92%—an increase of 20.01%)
Apache Presidents	5 (.09%)	27 (3.4%—an increase of 440%)	11 (0.05%)	20 (0.01%)	107 (4.5%—an increase of 435%)
Pueblo Governors	18 (3.5%)	33 (4.4%—an increase of 83.33%)	14 (0.06%)	52 (0.02%)	87 (3.5%—an increase of 67.3%)
Total	557 (100%)	757 (100%—an increase of 35.9%)	518 (100%)	1,956 (100%)	2,459 (100%—an increase of 25.71%)

TABLE 2  
NEWS COVERAGE OF NAVAJO NATION PRESIDENTS BY NEWSPAPER

	Number of Articles before Pandemic (% of column)	Number of Articles during Pandemic (% of column) % change	Number of Articles Mentioning Pandemic (% of column)	Number of Mentions of Navajo President before Pandemic (% of column)	Number of Mentions of Navajo President during Pandemic (% of column) % change
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	21 (3.9%)	115 (16.9%) <i>(an increase of 447.61%)</i>	101 (20.4%)	45 (2.3%)	332 (14.6%) <i>(an increase of 637.77%)</i>
<i>Gallup Independent</i>	329 (61.6%)	272 (39%) <i>(a decrease of 17.32%)</i>	157 (31.8%)	1,256 (66.6%)	1,056 (46.7%) <i>(a decrease of 15.92%)</i>
<i>Farmington Daily Times</i>	156 (29.2%)	271 (38.8%) <i>(an increase of 73.71%)</i>	208 (42.1%)	530 (28.1%)	743 (32.8%) <i>(an increase of 40.18%)</i>
<i>Santa Fe New Mexican</i>	10 (1.85%)	16 (2.2%) <i>(an increase of 60%)</i>	11 (2.2%)	17 (0.09%)	59 (2.6%) <i>(an increase of 247.05%)</i>
<i>Alamogordo Daily News</i>	6 (1.1%)	8 (1.1%) <i>(an increase of 33.33%)</i>	5 (1%)	11 (0.05%)	28 (1.2%) <i>(an increase of 154.54%)</i>
<i>Las Cruces Sun-News</i>	6 (1.1%)	12 (1.7%) <i>(an increase of 100%)</i>	9 (1.8%)	10 (0.05%)	35 (1.5%) <i>(an increase of 20.02%)</i>
<i>Carlsbad Current-Argus</i>	5 (0.09%)	3 (0.04%) <i>(a decrease of 40%)</i>	2 (0.04%)	10 (0.05%)	6 (0.002%) <i>(a decrease of 40%)</i>
<i>Roswell Daily Record</i>	1 (0.01%)	0 <i>(a decrease of 100%)</i>	0	5 (0.02%)	0 <i>(a decrease of 100%)</i>
Total	534 (100%)	697 (100%) <i>(an increase of 30.52%)</i>	493 (100%)	1,884 (100%)	2,261 (100%) <i>(an increase of 20.02%)</i>

Although reporting the name of the Navajo Nation president during the pandemic increased overall—30.52 percent in number of articles and 20.2 percent in number of mentions—three of the four northwestern New Mexico dailies account for most of that surge. The *Gallup Independent* and *Farmington Daily Times* were joined by the *Albuquerque Journal* in reporting that named the Navajo Nation president during the pandemic in more than single-digit percentages. The dramatic increases—447.61 percent and 637.77 percent, respectively—in the number of articles and number of mentions in the state’s largest circulation daily is attributable to relative underreporting in the period before the pandemic. News coverage of the Navajo Nation president increased dramatically in both the *Santa Fe New Mexican* and the *Las Cruces Sun-Times*, gains that, again, are attributable to previous underreporting.

Examination of the comparable figures for reporting of the names of mayors by the newspapers in their cities, as reported in Table 5 in the appendix, show considerable variation. The numbers for Albuquerque mayor Tim Keller, Santa Fe mayor Alan Webber, and Carlsbad mayor Dale Janway increased modestly, but news coverage for none of them was subject to underreporting before the pandemic. The numbers for Gallup mayor Louis Bonaguidi increased dramatically, while those for Farmington mayor Nate Duckett, Las Cruces mayor Ken Miyagishima, Alamogordo mayor Richard Boss, and Roswell mayor Dennis J. Kintigh all decreased.

Previous to the pandemic, reports usually named Navajo Nation president Jonathan Nez similar to a July 6, 2019, article from the *Gallup Independent*, “Navajo Effort to Get Radiation Exposure Bill Amended Drags On.”<sup>55</sup> Typical of the reporting that named him in the same daily during the pandemic was a January 19, 2021, article, “Nez, Navajo Council at Odds over Health Care.”<sup>56</sup> Nez was named nine times in the former news story and ten times in the latter.

The number of articles naming the Navajo Nation president increased from 534 to 697, a total increase of 163, between the period before the pandemic to the period since the start of the pandemic. Because 493 of the 697 articles during the latter period mentioned the pandemic in some manner, it is plausible that this factor increased news coverage. However, the difference between the increased number of articles, 163, and the number mentioning the pandemic, 493, suggests that much of the decision-making about the public health crisis was folded into reporting that would have occurred anyway.

Examination of the figures shown in Table 3 for the respective numbers of articles and mentions regarding the Jicarilla and Mescalero Apache presidents suggests a marked lack of journalistic interest, with the important exception of the *Alamogordo Daily News*. The numbers for seven of the eight dailies may charitably be described as picayune. They were too small to merit presenting percentage changes. The *Roswell Daily Record* published nothing. Although the failures of the *Gallup Independent* and *Farmington Daily Times* are understandable reflections of the lack of proximity undercutting newsworthiness for local newspapers, the failure of the statewide *Albuquerque Journal* seems less excusable. Crucially, the *Alamogordo Daily News* increased its reporting during the pandemic, repeatedly naming Mescalero Apache president Gabe Aguilar. For example, a March 21, 2020, article, “Tribe Declares State of Emergency:

TABLE 3  
NEWS COVERAGE OF JICARILLA APACHE AND MESCALERO APACHE PRESIDENTS  
BY NEWSPAPER

	Number of Articles before Pandemic	Number of Articles during Pandemic	Number of Articles Mentioning Pandemic	Number of Mentions of Presidents before Pandemic	Number of Mentions of Presidents during Pandemic
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	2 (40%)	4 (14.8%)	0	8 (40%)	7 (6.5%)
<i>Gallup Independent</i>	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Farmington Daily Times</i>	2 (40%)	0	0	0	0
<i>Santa Fe New Mexican</i>	0	2 (741%)	0	0	2 (1.8%)
<i>Alamogordo Daily News</i>	1 (20%)	15 (55.5%)	10 (91%)	12 (60%)	71 (66.35%)
<i>Las Cruces Sun-News</i>	0	2 (7.41%)	1 (9%)	0	13 (12.14%)
<i>Carlsbad Current-Argus</i>	0	4 (14.8%)	0	0	14 (13%)
<i>Roswell Daily Record</i>	0	0	0	0	0
Total	5 (100%)	27 (100%)	11 (100%)	20 (100%)	107 (100%)

Mescalero Apache Council’s Move Allows It to Mobilize and Mitigate Virus, Seek State, Federal Funding,” named Aguilar six times.<sup>57</sup>

Examination of Table 4 suggests that the most striking result of this content analysis is that nine of the nineteen Pueblo government governors went unnamed in reporting in the eight daily newspapers both before and during the pandemic. Overall, both the number of articles and the number of mentions regarding Pueblo government governors was small. No surprise, then, that parsimonious news coverage of the ten who were named was concentrated in the four northwestern New Mexico dailies. In contrast to its performance with respect to Navajo and Apache presidents, the *Albuquerque Journal* published more articles naming their Pueblo counterparts than the other dailies. Also, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* mentioned them more often than the other dailies in the period during the pandemic. For example, an April 7, 2020, *Santa Fe New Mexican* article, “New Mexico Virus Cases Continue to Soar, 109 More Reported,” named Joseph Talachy, governor of Pojoaque Pueblo, and Anthony Ortiz, governor of San Felipe Pueblo, once each.<sup>58</sup> Yet the numbers overall were small. Once again, the *Roswell Daily Record* published nothing.

Note that five of the governors of pueblos that conduct competitive elections—Nambé Pueblo, Picuris Pueblo, Pojoaque Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, and Zuni Pueblo—are named in articles. However, the governors for three of the pueblos holding competitive elections—Isleta Pueblo, Laguna Pueblo, and San Ildefonso Pueblo—go unnamed in articles. The governors for five pueblos that do not hold competitive elections—Jemez Pueblo, San Felipe Pueblo, Sandia Pueblo, Kewa Pueblo, and Zia Pueblo—are named in news coverage.

TABLE 4

NEWS COVERAGE OF JEMEZ PUEBLO, NAMBÉ PUEBLO, PICURIS PUEBLO, POJOAQUE PUEBLO, SAN FELIPE PUEBLO, SANDIA PUEBLO, SANTA CLARA PUEBLO, KEWA PUEBLO, ZIA PUEBLO, AND ZUNI PUEBLO GOVERNORS BY NEWSPAPER

	Number of Articles before Pandemic	Number of Articles during Pandemic	Number of Articles Mentioning Pandemic	Number of Mentions of Governors before Pandemic	Number of Mentions of Governors during Pandemic
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	6 (33.3%)	14 (42.4%)	8 (57.1%)	33 (63.4%)	29 (33.3%)
<i>Gallup Independent</i>	2 (11.1%)	6 (18.1%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (7.6%)	10 (11.4%)
<i>Farmington Daily Times</i>	4 (22.2%)	5 (15.1%)	3 (21.4%)	8 (15.3%)	8 (9.1%)
<i>Santa Fe New Mexican</i>	3 (16.6%)	4 (12.1%)	0	4 (7.6%)	36 (41.3%)
<i>Alamogordo Daily News</i>	0	2 (6%)	2 (14.2%)	0	2 (2.2%)
<i>Las Cruces Sun-News</i>	0	1 (3%)	0	0	1 (1.1%)
<i>Carlsbad Current-Argus</i>	3 (16.6%)	1 (3%)	0	3 (5.7%)	1 (1.1%)
<i>Roswell Daily Record</i>	0	0	0	0	0
Total	18 (100%)	33 (100%)	14 (100%)	52 (100%)	87 (100%)

## DISCUSSION

Findings reported in this study permit several conclusions to be drawn with respect to the investigation’s hypotheses. The first hypotheses—that the disproportional impact of the pandemic on Native Americans would be reflected in increased numbers of news stories naming Native American government presidents and governors and in the numbers of mentions of those tribal executives in articles from the period before the pandemic to the period after the start of the pandemic—is supported by the evidence, though largely for the Navajo Nation president. Six of the eight dailies increased their news coverage, with the statewide-circulation *Albuquerque Journal* stepping up its efforts dramatically. However, the hypothesis is not supported from the evidence of news coverage for the other presidents and governors. Only the *Alamogordo Daily News* and *Santa Fe New Mexican* appreciably increased their reporting, with the former evincing increased coverage of the Mescalero Apache president Gabe Aguilar and the latter exhibiting coverage of several Pueblo governors.

The second hypothesis—that news coverage would be distributed across populations in proportion to population size—found no support in these findings. More press attention was devoted to the Navajo president than to the Apache presidents and the Pueblo governors both before and during the pandemic. The number of articles in which Navajo Nation president Jonathan Nez is named and the number of

times his name is mentioned in those articles absolutely dwarf the numbers respecting his counterparts. Rather than the 47.4 percent or 70.4 percent of the news coverage as suggested by the calculated ratios, Nez received news coverage in the mid-90 percent range. So profound is the disproportion that it suggests an example of the Matthew Effect.<sup>59</sup>

A third hypothesis—that the governors of Pueblo governments that conduct competitive elections would receive more news coverage before and during the pandemic—also found no support in these findings. What is more probable, the chances of being named in news coverage increased with the geographic proximity of any particular Pueblo to Santa Fe and thus to the reporters of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. This observation gives rise to a fourth hypothesis—that geographic proximity would lead the seven local dailies to give more press attention to the presidents and governors of those Native American nations, tribes, and pueblos situated nearest to the dailies' own respective municipalities. These findings offer only uneven support for that hypothesis. In addition to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the *Alamogordo Daily News* increased its coverage of Mescalero Apache Tribe president Gabe Aguilar.

These conclusions underline the need for increased news coverage of New Mexico's Apache presidents and Pueblo governors. Arguably, they have been subjected to erasure via denial of difference, as the voice of the Navajo Nation president, however persuasive, was effectively substituted for the voices of his Apache and Pueblo counterparts. What is lost in that erasure is the diversity of insight other Native American leaders may offer about their own communities and about the state as a whole. All of their voices need to be heard.

The silencing of New Mexico's Apache presidents and Pueblo governors by substituting the voice of the Navajo Nation president for theirs is especially significant for the *Albuquerque Journal*, the state's leading daily and the news organization best positioned and resourced to rectify the disproportionate news coverage. Editors must direct reporters to interview New Mexico's Apache presidents and Pueblo governors as one crucial step in solving the problem. Hiring more Native American reporters and hiring more of them from Apache and Pueblo communities is another crucial step. Enhancing the public relations capacity of the Pueblos by hiring public relations officers using federal or New Mexico state government funds would also be helpful.

The COVID-19 pandemic frightened many and reduced some to silence. Yet it is in precisely such trying circumstances that the public mission of journalists and their news organizations to assist government decision-makers in communicating with their constituents and other government decision-makers becomes most important. In all likelihood, future crises comparable to the pandemic will disproportionately affect Native Americans. This study of news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that New Mexico's daily newspapers continued to erase Native America. That must cease. More inclusive journalism is possible.

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APPENDIX

Overall, as the figures in Table 5 show, news coverage naming municipal mayors by the daily newspapers in their cities increased from the period before the COVID-19 pandemic to the period after the start of the pandemic. The number of articles increased by 10.91 percent and the number of mentions increased by 20.64 percent. However, the tendency was not uniform. While news coverage increased in the *Albuquerque Journal*, *Gallup Independent*, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, and *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, it declined in the *Alamogordo Daily News*, *Las Cruces Sun-Times*, and *Roswell Daily Record*. And while the number of articles mentioning Farmington mayor Nate Duckett in the *Daily News* decreased, the number of mentions increased.

TABLE 5  
NEWS COVERAGE OF MUNICIPAL MAYORS BY THEIR DAILY NEWSPAPERS

	Number of Articles before Pandemic (and % of all such articles)	Number of Articles during Pandemic (and % of all such articles) % change	Number of Articles Mentioning Pandemic (and % of all such articles)	Number of Mentions of Mayor before Pandemic (and % of all such articles)	Number of Mentions of Mayor during Pandemic (and % of all such articles) % change
<i>Albuquerque Journal</i> Tim Keller	547	574 (an increase of 4.93%)	220	1,452	1,629 (an increase of 12.19%)
<i>Gallup Independent</i> Louis Bonaguidi	9	28 (an increase of 211.11%)	15	22	131 (an increase of 495.45%)
<i>Farmington Daily Times</i> Nate Duckett	103	78 (a decrease of 24.27%)	54	265	312 (an increase of 17.73%)
<i>Santa Fe New Mexican</i> Alan Webber	375	514 (an increase of 37.06%)	170	1,046	1,756 (an increase of 67.87%)
<i>Alamoordo Daily News</i> Richard A. Boss	104	15 (a decrease of 85.57%)	9	239	24 (a decrease of 89.95%)
<i>Las Cruces Sun-News</i> Ken Miyagishima	228	148 (a decrease of 35.08%)	86	528	329 (a decrease of 37.68%)
<i>Carlsbad Current-Argus</i> Dale Janway	144	322 (an increase of 123.61%)	242	295	465 (an increase of 57.62%)
<i>Roswell Daily Record</i> Dennis J. Kintigh	11	8 (a decrease of 27.27%)	0	18	17 (a decrease of 5.55%)
Total	1,521	1,687 (an increase of 10.91%)	796	3,865	4,663 (an increase of 20.64%)



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