

Indigenous Voice and Vision as Commodity in a Mass-Consumption Society: The Colonial Politics of Public Opinion Polling

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## COMMENTARY

### Indigenous Voice and Vision as Commodity in a Mass-Consumption Society

*The Colonial Politics of Public Opinion Polling*

D. ANTHONY TYEEME CLARK

Since March 2002 when *Sports Illustrated* published “The Indian Wars,” two public opinion polls concerned with controversial athletic mascots and sport team names have claimed to represent the views of American Indians.<sup>1</sup> Both polls—one conducted by the Peter Harris Research Group for CNN/*Sports Illustrated* and another carried out by the Annenberg Public Policy Center for the National Annenberg Election Survey—were commissioned to accurately measure points of view found among all American Indian people.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, both polls failed to do so.

Widespread use of public opinion polls dates to the New Deal, when Franklin D. Roosevelt employed a first-generation Finnish American named Emil Hurja to conduct polls for his 1932 and 1936 campaigns.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, polling has been crucial during political seasons, as even the most casual observer might notice in broadcast and print media. Polling public opinion also is an essential tool for the development of public policy, market, and social science research in the fields of criminal justice, law, economics, psychology, sociology, social work, and statistics.

Two principles shape public opinion polling: probability sampling and equal probability of selection. *Probability sampling* (in theory but not necessarily in practice) is the basis for all public opinion research. This principle assumes a randomly selected, small percentage of a population can represent the attitudes, opinions, or anticipated behavior of the entire population—if the sample is selected correctly. The goal of public opinion polling is to come up with the same results that would have been obtained had every single member of a population been interviewed. The key to achieving this goal is the principle of *equal probability of selection*. This principle assumes that if every member of a popula-

tion has an equal probability of being selected in a sample, then that sample will be representative of the population.

Shamefully, neither the Harris nor the Annenberg polls were tolerably guided by either of these two principles. The effect is antidemocratic and a form of white privilege (if white racial hegemony is understood as both a highly organized system and a continuous and dynamic process of social control rooted in public policy and private prejudice in ways that ensure whites wind up on top).<sup>4</sup> Pollsters rushed to produce results from troublesome samples not randomly selected from the entire population of American Indians. For a number of reasons, all Indians did not have an equal chance to contribute their views to the sample. The results, moreover, undoubtedly include the views of individuals who are not American Indians (and who may not even claim to be).

One problem related to the dreadful research ethics involved in the Harris and Annenberg polls is the manner in which the results from both circulate through print and broadcast mass media to communicate the illusion of agreement among all or most Natives. An undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for instance, cited the Harris poll in September 2004 to defend the notorious cheerleader Chief Illiniwek, outrageously—and incorrectly—declaring, “81 percent of American Indians support mascots like Chief Illiniwek.”<sup>5</sup> The example this Illinois undergraduate offers powerfully illustrates how the Harris poll, deliberately or not, has intervened since 2002 in local political disputes over who represents Natives and how Natives are represented in expressive culture and in a democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Both polls allow non-Natives, such as the undergraduate in Illinois, to speak for Natives; misrepresentations of aggregated research findings stand in to represent the views of actual human beings. These polls make it exceedingly more difficult for Natives to be heard as their results move through media to substitute for our many voices a shocking homogeneity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the lingering residue of colonization moves from functionaries at Harris and Annenberg through media communications into local politics, which in turn function to transform not only our images but our voices as well. With this transformation we lose our autonomy—our ability to speak for and otherwise render ourselves visible with all of our various faces, to represent all of our Indigenous diversity.

With publication of the Annenberg poll in September 2004, this crisis of representation has moved from corporations such as Time Warner (the corporate owner of *CNN/Sports Illustrated*) back to the ivory tower (keep in mind, the Harris folks obtained college and university degrees

prior to their employment). After failing to receive a response from Annenberg to engage us in conversation about their polling results, we took our case to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. “Hail to the Academicians,” the commentary that follows, was offered to the *Chronicle’s* editorial staff by fifteen American Indian scholars and teachers in response to the National Annenberg Election Survey. The *Chronicle*, it seemed, was the obvious location to express our concerns, publicly, before our academic colleagues. The editors declined to publish the commentary saying, “we have room for only a few of the hundreds of manuscripts—many of them very good—that are submitted each year.”<sup>8</sup>

HAIL TO THE ACADEMICIANS: NATIVE SCHOLARS  
AND TEACHERS RESPOND TO ANNENBERG

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“The professional football team in Washington calls itself the Washington Redskins. As a Native American, do you find that name offensive or doesn’t it bother you?”

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Responding to this question in a National Annenberg Election Survey conducted by telephone in forty-eight states from October 7, 2003, through September 20, 2004, almost 700 of 768 self-identified Native Americans say the team name of the National Football League franchise in the United States capital does not bother them.<sup>9</sup>

The Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania hosts the National Annenberg Election Survey. Established in 1994, the Annenberg Public Policy Center is directed by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication.<sup>10</sup> Adam Clymer, a journalist and author, is the political director for the National Annenberg Election Survey.

“I thought more people would have had problems with the name,” Clymer told Joyce Howard Price, a reporter for the *Washington Times*.<sup>11</sup> Clymer, a frequent contributor to the *New York Times* and former chief congressional correspondent for the *Washington Times*—the man George W. Bush in September 2000 called a “major league asshole”—told his former employer that it was his idea to ask the more than 65,000

Americans polled if they objected to the professional football team name.<sup>12</sup>

### NOT an Innocent Athletic Team Name

Words matter. The word “r—skin” is an expression in the larger vernacular of assaultive speech that non-Native Americans have wielded and continue to exercise as a weapon against the citizens of American Indian nations to terrorize, wound, debase, humiliate, and degrade.<sup>13</sup> Understood in a context of assaultive speech, “r—skin” represents an evil public menace and is rooted in the military lexicon of United States colonialist expansion.

Surgeon and Major John Vance Lauderdale, for instance, suggested privately to his wife late in the nineteenth century, “every r—skin must be killed.” Explaining his unapologetic rationale for genocide, he continued: “They are of no earthly good and the sooner they are swept from the land the better for civilization. . . . I do not think they can be turned and made good law-abiding citizens any more than coyotes can be used for shepherd dogs.”<sup>14</sup>

The classic scholarly work on intolerance and power, *The Nature of Prejudice* by the social psychologist Gordon Allport, devotes an entire chapter to verbal prejudice.<sup>15</sup> How well they distinguish difference determines the saliency and potency of attributes that sort people into perceived categories of similarity, according to Allport. Tasteless ethnic labels, the most widespread form of verbal prejudice, frequently use perceived physical characteristics—slant-eye for Asian peoples, red skin for Indigenous peoples, hooked-nose for Jewish peoples—to separate, classify, and demean.

During the twentieth century, in every corner of the United States and accessible at all levels of competitive athletics—high school, college and university, and professional—people increasingly have associated the word “r—skins” with athletes and sport fans. Nevertheless, as the trademarks and fan behaviors of the professional team in Washington powerfully illustrate, the word remains part of an extensive mental framework of visual impressions, assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations that distinguish American Indian nations and people from non-Native Americans.<sup>16</sup>

Athletics, school textbooks, games and toys, consumer products, Hollywood motion pictures, and comic books—the list probably is endless—shape this mental framework from childhood for most non-

Indians and some Natives too. Adults refashion, disseminate, and reinforce this mental framework through experience and hearsay in day-to-day conversation and in the mass media.<sup>17</sup>

### *Context, Context, Context*

In a telephone poll of 351 self-identified Native Americans conducted by the Peter Harris Research Group for *Sports Illustrated* (interpreted by Scott L. Price and published as “The Indian Wars” in March 2002), 36 percent of the people who identified as Natives living on reservations told Harris researchers that the term “r—skin” offended them. When asked whether they objected to mascots dressing up in so-called “Indian” headdresses, wearing war paint, whooping and dancing around with a tomahawk, however, 58 percent of this group said they find such behavior objectionable.<sup>18</sup>

At the nexus of mass media, law and policy, popular culture, and research in a society where the pathology of anti-Indigenous racism still is a sobering problem, research ethics are fundamental to the ongoing exploitation or well-being of oppressed peoples. Thus, so are the side effects of research methodologies and findings.

Jamieson, Clymer, and others responsible for the National Annenberg Election Survey erred in the direction of exploitation. From the development and execution of their telephone polling methodology to the distribution of their findings, the National Annenberg Election Survey is derelict, negligent, and remiss.

Although the results of this flawed poll will not touch the millions that *Sports Illustrated*'s “The Indian Wars” has reached since March 2002, newspapers that hurry to circulate the results under headlines such as “Indians Give a Cheer for the Name” and “‘Skins’ Nickname Offends Few Indians” do not help non-Native Americans learn about what American Indians think.<sup>19</sup>

### *More of the Same Statistical Research is NOT Necessary*

Fundamentally, the claims made by the National Annenberg Election Survey about what Indians think raise questions of representation and accountability in research. Jamieson and Clymer use “racial” statistics that look and sound scientific. Unreflectively collecting the responses of 768 individuals in forty-eight states who on the telephone identified themselves as Native American, allowed Jamieson and Clymer to quan-

tify what they perceived as a matter they can study using so-called objective methods. Implicitly they argue that biology causes a person who racially identifies as Indian or Native American to be in a certain condition or state of mind.

Tutufu Zuberi, author of *Thicker than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie*, argues that analyses and interpretations of racial statistics, developed as part of the eugenics movement, continue to reflect racist ideologies and have helped to justify harm to large groups of people.<sup>20</sup>

Jamieson and Clymer, perhaps unwittingly, participate in the tradition of research identified by Zuberi. In so doing, they abused the authority of an elite research university and have tarnished its reputation.

### *Hold Jamieson and Clymer Accountable*

Jamieson and Clymer ignore questions posed by us, their academic colleagues.<sup>21</sup> We wonder, for instance, what relevance they believe posing a question about the NFL team in Washington has for the 2004 election? What was the rationale for limiting the question—or their release of answers to the question—only to self-identified Native Americans?

While we agree that problems created by sports mascots that link competitive athletics with American Indian nations and people are important, we wonder why Jamieson and Clymer released findings to only this single question and not any others to which the 768 self-identified Native Americans may have responded.

In 2003, just one week before the Annenberg telephone interviews began on October 7, supporters of using the “r—skins” name in professional sports won a legal victory in a federal appeals court on September 30 that overturned an earlier federal trademark court decision.<sup>22</sup> In 2004 supporters of using the word in public schools triumphed when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed California Assembly Bill 858, The California Racial Mascots Act, on September 21.

Did releasing the results of the National Annenberg Election Survey on September 24 have anything to do with the legislative development in California? Did the decision to pose the question in the first place have anything to do with the federal court decision?

We anticipate answers to both questions are “yes,” leaving Jamieson and Clymer open to allegations of opportunism at the expense of American Indian nations and at the high cost of spreading misinformation about what Natives think.

Under what circumstances are “Indians” and “Native Americans”

synonymous identity labels? Because Jamieson and Clymer do not make this matter at all clear, they fail to account for conflicting claims on the term “Native American.”<sup>23</sup> Individuals who connect, in the words of Charlton Heston, as “native American—with a capital letter on ‘American’” clearly differentiate themselves as a people apart from American Indians.<sup>24</sup>

The press release issued by the National Annenberg Election Survey and the interview Clymer gave to his former employer, the *Washington Times*, are silent on these important issues. On the surface, Jamieson and Clymer did not account for the regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity of more than 550 American Indian nations. Evidently, they are not aware that more than 30 percent of American Indian homes on reservations and off-reservation trust lands do not have telephones from which people can be surveyed.<sup>25</sup>

Asking American Indian scholars and our allies to assist with framing the question and determining the nature of what they would consider satisfactory results might have helped Jamieson and Clymer avoid these errors.

Will Jamieson and Clymer respond to this provocation? Will they engage with us, Native scholars and our allies—their peers—in a conversation about research methodologies and the politics of circulating research findings in mass media?

We wonder. Probably not.

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Debbie Reese, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, Arizona State University

Michael Yellow Bird, University of Kansas



## NOTES

1. Scott L. Price, "The Indian Wars," *Sports Illustrated*, March 4, 2002, 66–72.

2. Harris was aware of the difficulty of surveying opinion among Natives according to Gavin Clarkson, a University of Michigan professor and citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, who independently prepared a response to Annenberg for the *Detroit News* (Gavin Clarkson, "Using Indian Mascots Continues Racial Harm," *Detroit News*, November 11, 2004). Clarkson says, "When the *SI* poll came out, I had a lengthy conversation with Peter Harris (his organization conducted the poll), and he readily admitted the difficulty of conducting a poll of American Indians, but he at least tried to do a number of things that the Annenberg folks did not (such as stratify the sample between urban and reservation Indians)." Gavin Clarkson, correspondence with the author, September 28, 2004. In the Annenberg poll, according to Clarkson, "No attempt was made to specifically target Indians. If someone self-identified as part of a larger set of demographic questions, they were also asked the R—skins question. Unlike the *Sports Illustrated* study, the Annenberg survey also failed to segment their sample into urban and reservation Indians or collect tribal affiliation. . . . Annenberg's sampling methodology seems to have demonstrably undersampled Indians in states with large tribal populations, such as California, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico while at the same time oversampling in states like Ohio, Tennessee, and Missouri that have no federally recognized Indian tribes." Gavin Clarkson, correspondence with the author, October 13, 2004.

3. See Melvin G. Holli, *The Wizard of Washington: Emil Hurja, Franklin Roosevelt, and the Birth of Public Opinion Polling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). For Canada, see Daniel J. Robinson, *Measure of Democracy: Polling, Market Research, and Public Life, 1930–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

4. For discussions of racism as a process, see Susan Thomas, "Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Antinatalist Response," *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (March 1998): 441; and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "From Slavery to Social Welfare: Racism and the Control of Black Women," in *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, ed. Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 289.

5. Craig Sondgeroth, "A Great Mascot," *Daily Illini*, September 9, 2004. Natives who are or have been students, faculty, and staff at the University of Illinois from Carlos Montezuma in 1921 to, more recently, Charlene Teters, Joe Gone, John McKinn, Debbie Reese, Genevieve Tenoso, and Bill Winneshiek—and many others—have spoken out publicly and forcefully about the crisis in Urbana-Champaign.

6. For more on this crisis of representation, see D. Anthony Tyeme Clark, “Wa a o, wa ba ski na me ska ta!: ‘Indian’ Mascots and the Pathology of Anti-Indigenous Racism,” in *In The Game: Race, Identity, and Sports in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Amy Bass (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

7. The Annenberg results allowed editors of the *Rocky Mountain News*, for instance, to assert confidently that “90 percent of [Native Americans] don’t see what the fuss is about, aren’t bothered by the name, and think it is ok for teams to keep it.” See “An Unexpected Ally of ‘R—skins,’” *Rocky Mountain News*, September 30, 2004. Admitting that “the term “r—skin” carries a more racial overtone,” editors for the student newspaper at James Madison University (in Harrisonburg, Virginia) used Annenberg to excuse racism and suggest nonetheless that, “in the public eye and according to most American Indians, it does not strike them as being ‘offensive.’ That’s right, even American Indians—the peoples whom the Washington R—skins essentially are named after—don’t mind the NFL team’s identity.” “In Reality, ‘R—skins Uncontroversial,” *The Breeze*, September 27, 2004. Other newspapers use Annenberg to undermine the views of individual Natives. In an article that featured Charlene Teters, for instance, a sympathetic journalist cited Annenberg to suggest that “Teters’s views don’t seem to be shared by many of her fellow American Indians.” Patrick Miller, “R—skins Nickname Has IATA Instructor Seeing Red,” *Albuquerque Journal*, October 16, 2004. Teters is an artist, teacher, writer, activist, mother, and citizen of the Spokane Nation who is perhaps most widely known for her leadership in the campaign to retire Chief Illiniwek, the notorious cheerleader for the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

8. Editors, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, correspondence dated October 14, 2004.

9. National Annenberg Election Survey, Press Release, “Most Indians Say Name of Washington ‘R—skins’ Is Acceptable While 9 Percent Call It Offensive,” September 24, 2004.

10. Between 1958 and his passing in October 2002, the philanthropist, patron of the arts, former ambassador, and University of Pennsylvania alum who launched *Seventeen* magazine in the 1940s and *TV Guide* the following decade, Walter H. Annenberg, pledged at least \$125.6 million to his alma mater. His donation of \$100 million in 1993—at the time, the largest cash gift ever made to a university—established the Annenberg Public Policy Center. In 2004 the Annenberg Public Policy Center has offices in Philadelphia and Washington DC; its functionaries conduct research in the fields of health communication and adolescent risk, information and society, media and the developing child, and political communication. For a journalistic treatment on how Annenberg got all of that money (his net worth wealth amounted to \$1.55 billion), see Christopher

Ogden, *Legacy: A Biography of Moses and Walter Annenberg* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999).

11. Joyce Howard Price, "Indians Give a Cheer for the Name 'R—skins,'" *Washington Times*, September 25, 2004.

12. Bush made this widely-reported comment to Dick Cheney at a Labor Day appearance in Naperville, Illinois, during the 2000 presidential campaign: "There's Adam Clymer—major league asshole from the *New York Times*." ("Oh yeah," Cheney replied. "He is, big time.")

13. For more on the concept "assaultive speech," see Mari J. Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1993).

14. John Vance Lauderdale, *After Wounded Knee: Correspondence of Major and Surgeon John Vance Lauderdale while Serving with the Army Occupying the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation*, ed. Jerry Green (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996). See also *Fighting Rebels and R—skins: Experiences in Army life of Colonel George B. Sanford, 1861–1892*, ed. Edward R. Hagemann (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

15. Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954; reprint, Garden City NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 174–83.

16. Natives long have recognized this. According to Alan Dundes and C. Fayne Porter, "American Indian Student Slang," *American Speech* 38 (December 1963): 270–77, most of the one thousand Indian students from eighty tribes they interviewed at Haskell Institute in 1963 resented being called "r—skins." Named in 1887 for Dudley Haskell, a U.S. representative from Kansas who was chairman of the House Committee of Indian Affairs and member of the Ways and Means Committee, Haskell (the institution) was a federal government Indian boarding school established by Congress in 1882 (it opened in 1884) to destroy Indigenous cultures by targeting children through compulsory education. In 1992 Haskell was accredited as a university for students who, in a typical year since then, represent over 150 Indigenous nations and other Indian entities (kinship communities, clans, tribes, bands, councils, reservations, colonies, towns, villages, rancherías, pueblos, confederacies, and groups).

17. A great deal of scholarship has been concerned with this mental framework. See, for instance, Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

18. Peter Harris Research Group, *Final Results*, January 31, 2002, questions 5c and 6b, quoted in Gavin Clarkson, "Racial Imagery and Native Americans: A First Look at the Empirical Evidence Behind the Indian Mascot Controversy," *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law* 11, no. 2 (2003): 399.

19. Price, "Indians Give a Cheer for the Name 'R—skins'"; "Poll: 'Skins'

Nickname Offends Few Indians,” *Kansas City Star*, September 24, 2004. The latter was an Associated Press article published in several newspapers in the United States including the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Shreveport Times*, and *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.

20. Tutufu Zuberi, *Thicker than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

21. Clymer did talk with some Natives. On October 18, 2004, he was a guest on a broadcast of Native America Calling hosted by Wendy Cody, “Native Mascots: Bringing the Issue to Primetime tv.” On November 5, 2004, Clymer responded to correspondence dated October 26 from Laurel R. Davis-Delano, a professor in the Department of Social Science at Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts. Copies of both letters are in the possession of the author.

22. A panel of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office canceled the Washington DC-based team’s trademarks in 1999 on the grounds that they disparage American Indian people in violation of federal trademark law. In 2003 a federal judge, Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, reversed this decision. See *Pro Football, Inc., v. Suzan Shown Harjo, et al.*, Civil Action No. 99-1385.

23. In his correspondence with Davis-Delano, Clymer indicated that if people responding to the question “Are you white, black or African American, Asian, American Indian, or some other race?” self-identified as “Native American,” Annenberg coded them as “Indian.” Native peoples tend not to agree on what specific all-inclusive identity marker should be used. See Michael Yellow Bird, “What We Want to Be Called: Indigenous Peoples’ Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels,” *American Indian Quarterly* 23 (Spring 1999): 1–21.

24. Charlton Heston, “Winning the Cultural War,” speech delivered at Ames Courtroom, Austin Hall, Harvard University, February 16, 1999.

25. Based on data from the 2000 Census, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) found that the majority of homes on reservations and trust lands have basic telephone service. Although the numbers varied widely from state to state and from tribe to tribe, the average rate was 67.9 percent. See report entitled “Telephone Subscribership on American Indian Reservations and Off-Reservation Trust Lands,” May 2003, available from the FCC.