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Without a Trace: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Exclusion in the Media

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WITHOUT A TRACE

Without a Trace: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Exclusion in the Media

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Communication Arts

By: MacKenzie Stewart

Under the mentorship of Dr. William Biebuyck and Ms. Gina Germani

ABSTRACT

The research in this paper is designed to explore the lack of media coverage of missing and murdered indigenous women through primarily qualitative methods and techniques as well as interpret the significance of the lack of coverage through the lens of a critical analysis. The research will address how the coverage of missing indigenous women qualitatively differs with the coverage received by missing white women in the United States and Canada. The research approaches include the analysis of news sources detailing cases of missing indigenous women and missing white women and how their coverage qualitatively differs, as well as a content analysis of two specific cases of one missing indigenous woman and one missing white woman who disappeared under very similar circumstances, yet had their cases covered in very different manners. The research analyzes research journals dedicated to missing and murdered indigenous women and how their lack of media coverage has impacted their communities. The results point to a disproportionate ratio of media coverage given to missing white women in a much larger capacity than missing indigenous women, as well as how this lack of coverage creates a perception that indigenous bodies are less valuable in Western societies. The results of this research are significant in the way that it calls attention to a media bias issue, as well as brings awareness to a widespread crisis of the brutality faced by indigenous women.

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Introduction

“Missing white woman syndrome” is a term coined to describe the disproportionate media coverage of missing women of a minority in comparison to white women. Traditionally, when white women and children go missing, there is near constant media coverage surrounding their disappearances. When high school senior Natalee Holloway went missing on a senior trip to Aruba, news sources across the United States were providing her story constant coverage in an attempt to find her. Laci Peterson, an American woman who was 8 months pregnant, also had her story broadcast tirelessly during her disappearance. Yet in 2010 when Abigail Andrews, a 28-year-old pregnant indigenous woman went missing from Fort St. John, British Columbia, the media coverage surrounding her disappearance was almost nonexistent. Her case is also yet to be resolved. In November of 2010, Amber Rose Marie Guiboche, another indigenous woman, disappeared from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, and it wasn't until August of 2014 that investigators reached out to the public for information on her disappearance. Urgency and outreach to the public was heavily emphasized in the cases of missing white women, while the cases involving missing indigenous women were either ignored or reported and investigated far later than their initial disappearances.

Zach Sommers, a sociologist from Northwestern University, conducted a study in 2016 where he extensively reviewed the news coverage from several news sources that covered stories on missing persons. Sommers found that not only were missing minority women and children covered far less in the media than their white counterparts, but also that the coverage of white missing women was far more intense than that of minority women. "By choosing to disproportionately highlight the experiences of whites and women, these four news websites

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(*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, CNN and *Minnesota Star*) are implicitly — or perhaps explicitly — intimating that the cases of those individuals matter more," (Sommers, 2016). It is apparent in the mainstream media that there is disproportionately less coverage when it comes to indigenous women and other minorities as compared to white women and children. This not only affects their chances of being found but also sets a negative precedent by creating distrust and fear in their communities. When there is a lack of coverage, it prevents the general public from being aware of the disappearances. This lack of coverage also prevents the possibilities of any sightings being reported since very few people know those individuals are missing. It also sets the precedent that it is not as “newsworthy” when indigenous women go missing as when a white woman goes missing. For these communities, it does not give them the same representation as it does for a white community, especially if the community is composed of families of low socioeconomic status. This creates a distrust between minority communities and the media.

The purpose of this research is to explore the relationship between race relations, media activism and socioeconomic disparities and focus on the reasons behind the lack of media coverage for missing and murdered indigenous women. It is important to study these media trends in order to reveal patterns in the quantity/quality of news coverage on missing persons cases. All missing people deserve the same level of media coverage and chances of being found, regardless of race, gender, or age. As stated in Article 8 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “everyone has an equal right to protection under the law when their rights have been subject to violation,” (United Nations, 1948). If all missing women were provided the same amount of media coverage regarding their disappearance, their chances of being found would be increased and the possibility of the individuals responsible for their disappearance being found

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guilty would also be increased. The study continues to refer back to cases such as the Natalee Holloway and Laci Peterson cases, but those two cases among several others received tireless media coverage when the two women were missing. The media did not produce news coverage equal to that of Holloway and Peterson during the disappearances of Abigail Andrews and Amber Rose Marie Guiboche. Those women may have been found or an arrest could have been made on their behalf had their stories been as heavily circulated in the media. Another problem that can be seen in this research is the lack of “mainstream” media activism surrounding media coverage for missing indigenous women. Although organizations and coalitions have been formed to call attention to these media trends such as the Native Women's Wilderness Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women organization, it seems as if there are no mainstream activism tactics or actions being taken in order to ensure that these missing indigenous women are having their stories circulated. According to an article published by indigenous authors in *Media International Australia*, “the media plays a large role in facilitating negative racial and gender ideologies about Indigenous women,” (Moeke-Pickering et al., 2018).

The research will be focused on analyzing specific cases and their news coverage to measure the disproportionality of cases involving missing white women in comparison to missing indigenous women. The study will analyze two specific missing persons cases involving white women and two missing persons cases involving indigenous women in detail. The study will also discuss how the lack of coverage affects the communities where these missing women come from and how it leads to a lack of social/political trust for the media in these communities. Statements have been made by activists and leaders of minority communities when their women and children go missing that indicate that they feel the lives of their missing women are perceived as being less important than the lives of missing white women due to the lack of

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coverage of the women and children in their community. Outside of the indigenous community, other minorities across the nation as a whole have seen a lack of attention from the media regarding their people as well. For example, the term “Amber Alert” was established as a legacy project to honor nine- year-old Amber Hagerman, a young, white child who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and then brutally murdered. The system was designed as an early warning system to notify citizens when a child has been abducted in a nearby area. Although the alerts have been proven useful in finding abducted children, we do not see them issued as quickly for minority children. When 16-year-old Karol Sanchez, a black child, was abducted from her home in Bronx, New York, 12 hours had passed before city authorities issued an Amber Alert in relation to her disappearance. Jumaane Williams, a public advocate for New York City, stated, “I know for a fact, the type of response that often comes too often depends on what that person looks like. No more,” he said. “We love our children. It shouldn’t take 11-12 hours for an Amber Alert,” (Dickson, 2019). The study also relates to social relations in the media as it will discuss how changes can be made in order to ensure fair coverage of all people in missing persons reports that are broadcast. Educating people of the disproportionately covered news stories regarding missing women and children based on race allows for a call to action being made to set guidelines in the media to see changes in reporting patterns.

“Missing white woman syndrome” is a phrase coined by Gwen Ifill, the late PBS anchor. Ifill coined the term at the 2004 Unity: Journalists of Color conference (Demby, 2017). It refers to the mainstream media's fixation on missing or endangered white women/children, such as Natalee Holloway or Elizabeth Smart and the disinterest or lack of coverage for missing women and children of a minority. Stillman analyzes the crucial role that the media plays in missing

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women cases and how the disproportionate coverage can be detrimental. “The mainstream media play a vital role in constructing certain endangered young women as valuable ‘front-page victims’, while dismissing others as disposable,” (Stillman, 2007). Stillman describes her methods of research as the following: “the 'diagnostic', to provide a cultural vocabulary for unveiling and resisting media biases; the 'theatrical', to revive the lives of disenfranchised bodies in the public imagination; and the 'archeological', to dig proactively for the human stories that have been buried beyond the margins,” (Stillman, 2007). Stillman also states that, “These messages are powerful: they position certain sub-groups of women - often white, wealthy, and conventionally attractive - as deserving of our collective resources, while making the marginalization and victimization of other groups of women, such as low-income women of color, seem natural” (p. 491).

Stillman provides evidence by discussing a case involving 3-year-old Madeleine McCann, who disappeared while on vacation with her family in Portugal and the case of missing 16-year-old Esmeralda Alarcon who was only one of more than 400 young women to go missing in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, between 2000 and 2010. International headlines involving McCann’s disappearance circulated the media during this time while there was very little coverage involving Alarcon’s disappearance. The evidence found in Stillman’s study provides context to the “missing white woman syndrome” phenomenon, as well as details how the disproportionate media coverage sets a biased tone in the media that portrays certain victims’ disappearances as more important than others.

The Crime Junkie podcast, hosted by Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat, who have both worked in the criminal justice field and are advocates with Crime Stoppers of Central Indiana, have presented in numerous podcast episodes the issue of underrepresentation of missing women

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of color/indigenous women in the media. Flowers and Prawat covered a case on their podcast regarding the “Highway of Tears”, which is Highway 16 in British Columbia, Canada. Many indigenous women and girls of the surrounding area have either gone missing or have been found murdered along the 450-mile stretch of road since the late 1960’s. The majority of the women found murdered on the highway have been Aboriginal women or young girls.

“Aboriginal women aged 25 to 44 are five times more likely to suffer a violent death than other women in Canada” (*Stolen Sisters*, 2004).

Kristen Gilchrist states that, “the Aboriginal women received three and a half times less coverage; their articles were shorter and less likely to appear on the front page. Depictions of the Aboriginal women were also more detached in tone and scant in detail in contrast to the more intimate portraits of the White women,” (Gilchrist, 2010). Gilchrist uses quantitative and qualitative content analyses to highlight the disproportionality of news coverage of the respective groups of women. When Gilchrist breaks down the amount of coverage for each case that she studies she found that, “the White women were mentioned in the local press a total of 511 times compared with only eighty-two times for the Aboriginal women; more than six times as often... When this analysis was broken down to include only articles discussing the missing/murdered women’s cases specifically, disparities remained. The Aboriginal women garnered just fifty-three articles compared with 187 articles for the White women, representing three and a half times less coverage overall for the Aboriginal women,” (Gilchrist, 2010). Gilchrist also determined that cases involving missing indigenous/Aboriginal women were scant in coverage as well as buried within many articles, in contrast to many missing white women’s cases making the front page.

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If more coverage circulated around the cases of these missing Aboriginal women, would they have a better chance of being found? The research draws into question how these disappearances impact the communities they come from and how these communities have a lack of trust with the media. As a society who should hold the media in a position to give voice to all people, regardless of race, the research poses the question that this media bias is the reason that so many of these cases are unresolved. It is up to the people to push the media to follow more ethical guidelines regarding racial equality in news coverage of their missing women and children in order for these communities to see a change. It is time for them to have their stories told and their voices heard.

In an article published by Matthew Daley in *The Canadian Press*, Daley discusses the disappearance of 22-year-old Gabby Petito, who went missing from Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming in September of 2021. Daley discusses his interview with Deb Haaland, Interior Secretary of the United States. Haaland discusses the issue of the lack of media coverage surrounding missing indigenous women, specifically in Wyoming in this case. “A report prepared for the state of Wyoming found that at least 710 Native Americans were reported missing between 2011 and late 2020. Between 2010 and 2019, the homicide rate per 100,000 for Indigenous people was 26.8, eight times higher than the homicide rate for white people” (Daley, 2021). As a native woman herself, Haaland feels strongly about the issue and is pushing for change that will hold the media and investigators responsible for handling these cases of missing indigenous women and girls. This article is useful for my research given its context in a current event revolving around missing indigenous women and their lack of media coverage; it also contains information from an indigenous community leader that will further highlight the perspective of indigenous community leaders.

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For this research project, it has proven useful to analyze other scholarly articles that discuss the topic of “missing white woman syndrome”, as their fieldwork has already been synthesized and will provide a foundation on which to base the ongoing research. In addition to analyzing news content and cases regarding missing indigenous women and the seeming lack thereof, it will also be important to analyze activism tactics taken by these marginalized communities. This includes researching existing activism groups that have been organized as a way to provide a voice for these communities which these indigenous women come from, as well as analyzing the tactics they have used in order to have their voices heard. By giving these marginalized women and their communities a platform, it ensures their step toward equal representation in the media. These groups have been organized specifically to address the topic of this research, which will help in providing testimonies and interviews from victims and families directly impacted by the lack of media coverage their indigenous women have received. By doing so, this will allow for the development of interpretations that will assist in the understanding of what changes can be made in the media and how activism is a direct action that can promote awareness and changes for ensuring all missing women equal news coverage.

Based on existing research and articles written by individuals who have studied the topic, there is apparent evidence that not only is there, in fact, less coverage regarding missing and murdered indigenous women, but that coverage is far more detached and less detailed than the coverage of missing white women, as mentioned in the Gilchrist article. Both Stillman and Daley articles explicitly provide details of how frequently indigenous women go missing in comparison to the news coverage they receive. The articles themselves provided a substantial foundation for the research in terms of proving the idea that missing indigenous women receive far less coverage than missing white women. This research project will go on to explore the theory of

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why they receive less coverage, as well as will provide context regarding how this lack of coverage affects indigenous communities.

Methods

The study will utilize broadly qualitative methodological approaches to complete this research. As a form of primary resources, the study will analyze the amount of news coverage of missing indigenous women and compare coverage based on quantity (breaking news features, number of times it appears in sources) and quality (how the women and their disappearances are spoken about, speculations about their disappearances) in comparison to missing white women. By doing this content analysis through 10 cases of missing white women and 10 missing indigenous women, the study will be able to reveal patterns in news coverage regarding missing women and any disproportionality between the coverage of missing white women and missing indigenous women. These 20 cases will be analyzed by how many times the missing women's names appear in news searches. The study will also analyze two specific missing persons cases (Laci Peterson and Abigail Andrews) who both went missing under similar circumstances but received very disproportionate amounts of news coverage. By analyzing these specific documents and using a horizontal analysis as described in *A Journey Through Qualitative Research: From Design to Reporting*, "the comparison of the different documents will allow us to answer the following questions: In what sequence does a process occur? In what context does a phenomenon appear? How does such a group of people become privileged?," (Gaudet and Robert, p. 144, 2018). This research project will also analyze databases containing information related to missing indigenous women's cases. By using these databases, the research will compare the number of documented missing indigenous women and the amount of available

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media information regarding their cases. The use of secondary sources such as podcasts and existing research on the topic will allow readers to further understand the stories of missing indigenous women and why their stories need to be equally shared by the media.

The critical approach of this research topic will be based around race relations and socioeconomic disparities, from the perspective of critical race theory, along with decoloniality theory as a way to understand a deeper historical context of the issue, as well as how the issue affects the communities that indigenous women come from. The context of analyzing critical theory and background in this research is shaped by the idea that critical theory is used to “consider reality and truth to be shaped by specific historical, cultural, racial, gender, political and economic conditions, values and structures; in their research they critique racism, sexism, oppression and inequality, and they press for fundamental and transformative social change,” (Brennen, 2017, p. 9). The background of these theories coupled with the evidence found in the study will make sense of patterns that can explain why missing white women have their coverage circulated in the media at a high volume in comparison to missing indigenous women who are not given an equal amount of coverage. The research will evaluate the theoretical perspective of critical race to provide further context to the findings. Critical race theory can be used to explain social and cultural issues as they relate to race, law, and social and political power (Gordon, 1999). This framework offers an understanding by placing race at the center of an analysis and drawing on historical inequalities that is still seen in racial context today. In relation to this research project, critical race theory will be referenced to examine the context of missing indigenous women in the media and why their coverage appears to be disproportionate to that of missing white women.

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Decoloniality theory is referenced in the analysis of this research to make media patterns visible in terms of disproportionality in coverage of women based on their race, as well as activism methods that can be used to combat the disproportionate coverage of missing indigenous women in comparison to the greater amount of coverage received by missing white women. “Decoloniality refers to the logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power created by the massive processes and aftermath of colonization and settler-colonialism...More plainly said, decoloniality is a way for us to re-learn the knowledge that has been pushed aside, forgotten, buried, or discredited by the forces of modernity, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism,” (*What is Decoloniality?*, 2021). By referring to decolonial theory approaches, the research can suggest methods of disrupting the settler colonialism framework in the media that creates the idea of seeing more coverage of missing white women than missing indigenous women as normal or natural. As stated by Walter Mignolo, literature professor of Duke University, “racism and sexism are the energies moving the destitutions of people to maintain the privileges of whiteness and heteronormativity,” (Mignolo, 2021). Once exposing the patterns, the research will aim to present methods of reform that can be imposed on the media in order to ensure equal coverage in quantity and in context for missing women from indigenous backgrounds. The study will explore the reasoning behind the lack of media coverage for missing indigenous women, exposing inconsistent patterns of their coverage in comparison to missing white women. It will be focused on analyzing news coverage and content to measure the disproportionality of the “newsworthiness” of these missing persons cases involving indigenous women in comparison to white women. Along with general content analysis, it will be analyzing specific cases of missing indigenous women through discourse analysis in terms of the quality of news coverage they received in comparison to the quality of news coverage that missing white

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women received. This research project will also discuss how the lack of coverage affects the communities which these missing women come from and how it leads to a lack of social/political trust for the media in these communities. Several statements have been made by activists and leaders of minority communities when their women and children go missing that indicates that they feel the lives of their missing women are perceived as less important than the lives of missing white women due to the lack of coverage their women receive. The study also relates to social relations (bias, racial framing, etc.) in the media as it will discuss how changes can be made in order to ensure fair coverage of all people in missing persons reports that are broadcast. By educating people of the disproportionately covered news stories regarding missing women based on race, it allows for a call to action to be made to set guidelines in the media to see changes in reporting patterns.

Analysis and Data

Database and Reporting Analysis

The data provided in the Wyoming Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples Report by the Wyoming Survey and Analysis Center from the University of Wyoming presents statistics regarding missing and murdered indigenous people and compares them to the news coverage these cases received. The report provides the most recent statistics regarding missing indigenous people in Wyoming.

Between 2011 and September 2020, 710 Indigenous persons were reported missing.

Some Indigenous people were reported missing more than once during the time period, resulting in a total of 1,254 missing person records for Indigenous people. Eighty-five

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percent were juvenile, and 57% were female. They were reported missing from 22 counties in Wyoming. Ten percent of missing Indigenous people are found within the same day they are reported missing, 50% are found within one week. One-fifth of the Indigenous people reported missing were missing for 30 or more days, which is a higher percentage than White people missing for 30 or more days (11%). (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Statewide Report, 2020)

The report goes on to outline the disparity found between media coverage of missing indigenous women in comparison to the media coverage of missing white women. “Only 30% of Indigenous homicide victims had newspaper media coverage, as compared to 51% of White homicide victims. Indigenous female homicide victims had the least amount of newspaper media coverage (18%),” (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Statewide Report, 2020). The coverage used for these statistics was also analyzed based on language and tone in comparison to the media coverage of missing white women. WYSAC found that, “the newspaper articles for Indigenous homicide victims were more likely to contain violent language, portray the victim in a negative light, and provide less information as compared to articles about White homicide victims,” (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Statewide Report, 2020). The report by WYSAC details that community barriers may be a factor that contribute to the lack of resources and effort associated with these cases, noting that the overall “lack of trust in law enforcement and the judicial system, no single point of contact during an investigation, and lack of information during the investigation and after the final outcome” are significant hurdles faced by the indigenous community,” (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Statewide Report, 2020).

The Urban Indian Health Institute, a division of the Seattle Indian Health Board, compiled a report outlining the discrepancies between statistics related to missing indigenous

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women and how they were reported in national missing persons databases. The report states, “The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the US Department of Justice’s federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases,” (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018). These discrepancies in reported numbers can be attributed to several factors. The UIHI report states the following as reasons for the lack of quality data: “underreporting, racial misclassification, poor relationships between law enforcement and American Indian and Alaska Native communities, poor record-keeping protocols, institutional racism in the media, and a lack of substantive relationships between journalists and American Indian and Alaska Native communities,” (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018). The UIHI requested data from all municipal police departments in the 71 cities of Alaska and one state department. Out of those departments, 40 agencies provided data, 14 did not provide data and 18 of the agencies still had pending Freedom of Information Act requests as of 2018 (UIHI, 2018). Abigail Echo-Hawk, Director of the Urban Indian Health Institute stated that, “until there is cooperation and better tracking systems at all government levels, the data on missing and murdered Indigenous women will never be 100 percent accurate, which is what we need to strive for in order to protect our mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunties,” (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018).

In Canada, where there are a disproportionate number of missing and murdered indigenous women according to the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), there is no national database used to track missing persons.

There are no national data sources regarding missing persons in Canada. This makes it difficult to look at the issue of missing Aboriginal women and girls in comparison to

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other missing women. The Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police (SACP) is perhaps the only policing body to publish statistics on missing persons. It reports that almost 59% of missing women and girls in Saskatchewan are of Aboriginal ancestry.

(Native Women's Association of Canada, 2019)

Without a consistent database to keep track of missing Aboriginal or indigenous women, these cases are far less likely to be solved without proper resources. Nearly half of murder cases in NWAC's database remain unsolved. NWAC has found that only 53% of murder cases involving Aboriginal women and girls have led to charges of homicide. This is dramatically different from the national clearance rate for homicides in Canada, which was last reported as 84% (Statistics Canada 2005, p.10). While a small number of cases in NWAC's database have been "cleared" by the suicide of the offender or charges other than homicide, 40% of murder cases remain unsolved," states the NWAC in their most recent Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Fact Sheet.

Analyzing Quantitative Media Data

Through the data collection process of the research, the first approach to analyzing the data included documenting the disparity between the presence of information available on missing white women and the information available on missing indigenous women. This method was used as an initial approach to provide a basic understanding *how* the lack of initial media coverage can impact missing persons cases and available information on these women in the years following their disappearances. The number of results available on each missing woman provides an understanding of how much information on their cases is available in scholarly news

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archives. Immediately it was apparent that there was less information available on the cases regarding missing indigenous women. The search keywords included: victim's name followed by "*missing*". The following data represents the approximate number of relevant results available on these women and their cases via EBSCOhost research platform (news):

Missing White Women

- Gabby Petito (reported missing September 2021, remains recovered September 2021): 1,105 results found
- Laci Peterson (reported missing December 2002, remains recovered April 2003): 1,424 results found
- Natalee Holloway (reported missing May 2005, remains not recovered; presumed dead 2012): 259 results found
- Maura Murray (reported missing February 2004, remains not recovered): 157 results found
- Kristin Smart (reported missing May 1996, remains not recovered): 1,378 results found
- Susan Powell (reported missing December 2009, remains not recovered): 1,991 results found
- Chandra Levy (reported missing May 2001, remains recovered May 2002): 3,680 results found
- Mollie Tibbetts (reported missing July 2018, remains recovered August 2018): 435 results
- Kristen Modafferri (reported missing June 1979, remains not recovered): 2,043 results found

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- Lori Hacking (reported missing July 2004, remains recovered October 2004): 356 results found

Missing Indigenous Women:

- Kaysera Stops Pretty Places (reported missing August 2019, remains recovered August 2019): 21 results found
- Abigail Andrews (reported missing April 2010, remains not recovered): No results found
- Amber Guiboche (reported missing November 2010, remains not recovered): 20 results found
- Brandy Wesaquate (reported missing January 2012, remains not recovered): 1 result found
- Misty Upham (reported missing October 2014, remains recovered October 2014): 42 results found
- Karen Wallahee (reported missing November 1987, remain not recovered): 8 results found
- Pepita Redhair (reported missing March 2020, remains not recovered): 1 result found
- Ella Mae Begay (reported missing June 2021, remains not recovered): 7 results found
- Jennifer Catcheway (reported missing June 2008, remains not recovered): 109 results found

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- Rosalita Longee (reported missing June 2015, remains not recovered): 10 results found

After analyzing the results returned for each missing woman listed above, the data shows that not only did the missing white women's cases return more search results, but five out of ten of the missing white women had their remains recovered. In contrast, only two out of the ten missing indigenous women had their remains recovered, some of them yielding no search results at all in the EBSCOhost database. It's also important to note that all of the missing white women had a Wikipedia page regarding at least some aspect of their murder or disappearance. The only missing indigenous woman with a Wikipedia page was Misty Upham, who was a critically acclaimed Native American actress. From the results, the data shows the glaring disproportionately fewer results available for missing indigenous women in comparison to the missing white women. The disproportionate and overall lack of search results recovered from many of the cases involving missing indigenous women raises the question of the possibilities of more of their remains being found if more information surrounding their cases had been available and more widely covered in the media.

Podcast Coverage

The true crime genre of podcasts has become one of the most popular amongst listeners in recent years. "In America, Canada, and on global charts, a true crime podcast is currently ranking as number one, and four out of ten podcasts on the top ten American Spotify chart are of the true crime genre," (Chartable 2020). With the popularity of the true crime genre growing,

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more creators are using this platform to tell the stories of victims in missing and murdered cases. The analysis of three different popular true crime podcasts that cover missing persons and murder cases were used to compare the coverage of white women involved in these crimes versus indigenous women involved in these crimes. The three podcasts used were *Crime Junkie*, *Casefile*, and *My Favorite Murder*. In an analysis of *Crime Junkie* podcast, hosted by Ashley Flowers and Britt Prawat, which premiered in 2017, the hosts have researched and recorded 4 episodes involving missing and murdered indigenous women. Those cases include the “Mysterious Death of Kaysera Stops Pretty Places”, “Murdered: Faith Hedgepeth”, “Murdered: Candace Rough Surface”, and “Serial Killer: Highway of Tears”. As of January of 2022, *Crime Junkie* had approximately 220 episodes of content available on podcast streaming platforms. Given that 4 out of 220 of their podcast episodes were related to missing and murdered indigenous women, only about 1.82% of their content covered missing indigenous women. *Casefile*, which premiered in 2016, returned searches for 3 cases related to missing or murdered indigenous women. Those 3 cases included “The Bowraville Murders”, “Cindy and Mona Lisa Smith”, and “Lisa Marie Young”. As of March of 2022, *Casefile* had approximately 202 episodes of content available on podcast streaming platforms. Given that 3 out of 202 of the podcast episodes were related to missing and murdered indigenous women, only about 1.49% of the content covered missing and murdered indigenous women. *My Favorite Murder* premiered in early 2016 and returned 1 search related content discussing missing or murdered indigenous women. That case included “Episode 296: Stakeouts and Balloons”, which covered the murders of Kiana Klomp, Amber Tuccaro, and Ella Mae Begay. As of March of 2022, *My Favorite Murder* had approximately 317 episodes of content available on podcast streaming platforms.

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Given that 1 out of 317 of the podcast episodes were related to missing and murdered indigenous women, only about 0.32% of the content covered missing or murdered indigenous women.

Analyzing Qualitative Media Coverage: Laci Peterson and Abigail Andrews

The following approach used in data collection involves the analysis of news and media material available for two specific missing persons cases involving women under similar circumstances. The circumstances surrounding both women's cases include the fact that both women were pregnant at the time of their disappearance, both of the women were reported relatively quickly, and both women had their cases investigated by local police. The first case used in the comparison is the disappearance of Laci Peterson. Laci Denise Peterson, a 27-year-old female in Modesto, California, was reported missing December 24, 2002. Peterson was 8-months pregnant when she was reported missing by her husband, Scott Peterson, after he had returned home from a fishing trip and was unable to find his wife in their home. Beginning December 26, 2002, Modesto Police department officials began searching the home and surrounding areas for Laci. Immediately, Peterson's case began to gain media traction not only in Modesto, but nationwide as the search for her spanned across California. By April of 2003, police had not only recovered the body of Laci Peterson near Point Isabel Regional Park near Berkley, California, but also the fetus of her child, Connor Peterson. After a thorough investigation by Modesto Police Department, it was determined that Laci Peterson's husband, Scott Peterson, had murdered Laci and disposed of her body near the fishing marina he had visited the morning of her disappearance. Scott Peterson was convicted in 2005 for the murder of his wife and unborn child and sentenced to death. As of 2021, Peterson had his charges reduced and is being held for life without parole in San Quentin State Prison.

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On April 7, 2010, Abigail Patrice Andrews, a 28-year-old expectant mother from Fort St. John, British Columbia, was reported missing by her mother who had not heard from her in several days. The Fort St. John Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) began searching for Andrews after receiving the report and concluded their search by April 20, 2010. The local media attention that Andrews' disappearance received began to diminish once police concluded their search with no evidence to connect to the missing woman. Andrews was three months pregnant at the time of her disappearance, which was a cause of concern for her family. In June of 2010, Andrews' family members formed their own search party in hopes to find any evidence associated with Abigail's disappearance, but they were unable to find anything. In 2013, the RCMP released a re-enactment video of what they believed were Abigail's last steps before disappearing in an attempt to generate new information on the case. As of 2022, there are still no official suspects that have been named in connection with Andrews' case, as well as no sign of Andrews' remains.

Analysis of Articles

In the missing case of 27-year-old Laci Peterson, reporters of the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized extensive detail on Peterson's disappearance, as well as emphasized the amount of police involvement present in the case from the beginning. In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* on December 28, 2002, with the headline "Pregnant Woman Disappears While Walking Her Dog; FBI, police, volunteers by the hundreds hunt for the 27-year-old Modesto mother-to-be", there's a clear outline detailing Laci's disappearance and search efforts. "Hundreds of volunteers joined police and FBI agents on Friday in combing parks and neighborhoods for a woman who disappeared Christmas Eve day while walking her dog...

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Peterson, 27, who is eight months pregnant, left her Modesto home Tuesday morning to walk her golden retriever. When her husband, Scott, returned that evening from a Bay Area fishing trip, she was gone,” states the *Los Angeles Times* article. This article was published four days after Peterson’s initial disappearance. The article uses a tone that gives readers a very clear understanding of the urgency in finding Peterson. In an article published in the *Ottawa Citizen* on April 15, 2010, titled “B.C. landfill searched for missing woman”, the article provides a brief summary of Abigail Andrews’ disappearance, followed by a discrepancy between the Royal Canadian Mountain Police’s investigation and Andrews' family's understandings of the state of the case in its early stages. The article states, “Abigail Andrews, 28, was last seen walking away from her Fort St. John apartment on the evening of April 7. She planned to visit a friend, said her father, Doug Andrews. She has not been seen since. "At this point, there are no persons of interest I can identify," RCMP spokeswoman Cpl. Annie Linteau said Wednesday. However, Doug Andrews said police officers told him they knew who was likely responsible for the disappearance of her daughter, who was three months' pregnant,” (*Ottawa Citizen*, April 2010). Comparing these two articles published in the days following each woman’s disappearance, there’s a clear textual difference in the reporting. In Peterson’s case, the author of the article emphasizes Peterson’s humanness by using phrases such as “mother-to-be” immediately in the headline, whereas in the *Ottawa Citizen*’s reporting, the headline utilizes language that indicates Andrews is already deceased by titling the article “B.C landfill searched for missing woman”, almost emphasizing that one of the missing women is a human (Peterson) while the other is essentially garbage (Andrews). Another glaring contrast between the two articles can be seen in the way that the *Los Angeles Times* emphasizes the community volunteer and police effort

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executed in the early days of Peterson's disappearance while the *Ottawa Citizen's* article only details one search executed exclusively by the RCMP.

In another article published regarding the case of missing Laci Peterson by the *Los Angeles Times* on December 30, 2002, the author places an emphasis on why Peterson's disappearance has been so impactful on the community.

She said she knew why the disappearance had struck such a chord. "I think it has to do with her being pregnant and the idea of someone being taken from their home and family on Christmas Eve," Farley said. By Sunday, 10,000 fliers had been distributed and 15,000 more were being printed. Grim-faced dairy farmers were among hundreds of volunteers combing the area on foot and horseback. (*Los Angeles Times*, 2002)

While articles regarding Andrews' disappearance include the detail of her pregnancy, the tone shifts from language used in the Peterson case of a missing and vulnerable expectant mother to a young woman who willfully walked away from her life. In an article published by *The Province* in June of 2010, Andrews' family states that, "Still there's lots of talk that she's just gone -- she's partying," she added. "We just would like people to look at this more seriously and consider the fact that maybe there's someone amongst them . . . who has information." This statement shows that the public and law enforcement's views on the two missing women have a stark contrast even though they were both pregnant and missing. Another glaring difference between the two women's cases is the financial support received to lead to their return home or information regarding their whereabouts. In an article published by the *Chicago Tribune* on December 30, 2002, it's apparent that Peterson's case received ample community financial support towards search efforts. The article states, "The reward for a missing pregnant woman jumped to \$500,000

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after a donation from a family friend who asked to remain anonymous. The man wrote a check for \$375,000, quadrupling the reward for information leading to the safe return of Laci Rocha Peterson, according to a foundation coordinating the volunteer effort to find the missing woman.” However, in Andrews’ case, not only is there no outpouring of community support, but Andrews’ family also struggles to raise the funds to purchase two billboards with her photo and identifying information that may lead to developments in her case. In an *Alaska Highway News* article published on June 15, 2002, Andrews’ family expresses their shortcomings in raising funds for Abigail’s search.

Andrews' aunt, Beth Cobbett, recently helped arrange for two large billboards to be put up on the Alaska Highway to remind people that the case remains unsolved. She said most of the \$4,700 for the boards has been raised through donations to an account set up at the Bank of Nova Scotia, in trust for Abigail. "I have paid for both of the boards, but I am short about \$900. I am not sure if I should continue asking for donations or not, but I would certainly be grateful for any that might come in. (*Alaska Highway News*, June 2010)

Although the comparison of the funding received in search efforts related to Peterson’s case versus Andrews’ case is not necessarily correlated with the news coverage they received, it does raise the question of whether more widespread coverage of Andrews’ case beyond the British Columbia area would have brought in more public donations from other areas. The comparison between these two cases also points out a wealth gap between white and indigenous communities in the way that it is less likely for an indigenous person to have a community member contribute a large sum of money toward their case, as these communities are systematically economically disadvantaged.

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In an article published by Andrea González-Ramírez in *The Cut* in September of 2021, following the disappearance of 22-year-old Gabby Petito, González-Ramírez interviews a prominent leader of the indigenous community, Connie Walker. Walker is a former journalist from CBC News as well as an indigenous woman herself from the Okanese First Nation (Lett, 2020). Walker is also the host of several podcast series including *Missing & Murdered: Who Killed Alberta Williams* podcast, *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo*, and *Stolen: The Search for Jermain*. All of Walker's investigative podcasts are centered around cases of missing indigenous women in Canada and the United States to shed light on their details that are less covered in the mainstream media. During Walker's interview with *The Cut*, she tells González-Ramírez that, "it's not an exaggeration to say there's a crisis of violence [that] Indigenous women and girls face in Canada and in the United States. The rates of violence — whether you're talking about being murdered, being sexually assaulted, being physically assaulted, being emotionally abused — are incredibly high in Indigenous communities. That is not reflected in what we see in the media coverage and true crime specifically," (*The Cut*, 2021). Walker goes on to explain that the majority of true crime media is typically centered around white women and gives less exposure to indigenous communities.

Most of the docuseries, podcasts, and other kinds of stories that focus on this issue of violence against women usually focus on white women, like Gabby Petito. I can't help but think of Jermain's family and what it's like for them watching this unfold. And not just Jermain's family — the sad reality is there are hundreds, if not thousands, of other Indigenous families who also probably are watching this and longing for that kind of attention and those kinds of resources. (*The Cut*, 2021)

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Walker explains that the widespread media coverage of Petito's case not only led to more exposure of the case to reach wider audiences in hopes of further developments, but the news coverage also influenced how the case itself was handled by law enforcement. "The attention focused on Gabby Petito's case didn't just result in a lot of headlines — it also influenced the reaction of law enforcement. I was watching on CNN about how they were searching every inch of this area where she was thought to have been," Walker stated.

When asked why there is a disproportionate amount of news coverage between missing white women and missing indigenous, Walker explains that it starts in the newsrooms. "We have to ask: Why are there some cases that break out and that get more attention? The answer to that is taking a look at ourselves and who is in these newsrooms. Who are the people who are getting to decide which stories are really important, which stories Americans care about?" stated Walker. Walker details an account of the very first time she pitched a story to her editor about a missing indigenous woman, Amber Redman, in 2006. Redman was someone from Walker's hometown who had recently disappeared, coincidentally the same time frame that a white woman named Alicia Ross had gone missing from the Ontario area. Walker stated:

I remember thinking that these cases were so similar. But Alicia's case was on the cover of the national newspapers, and it was covered by the national newscast, and Amber's case barely got any local coverage. I went in to my editor to pitch a story about the media coverage of these two cases. She held up her hand and she said, "This isn't another poor Indian story, is it?" (*The Cut*, 2021)

The attitude displayed by her editor is still a common sentiment today. Walker explains that this issue stems from the lack of representation and diversity in newsrooms across the country,

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especially Indigenous journalists like herself. “You don’t have to be an Indigenous journalist to tell a story about MMIW, but we can tell stories and we should be given the support and space to tell them. We have the expertise and the lived experience to understand the really complex issues that are behind this disproportionate rate of violence that Indigenous women and girls face,” (*The Cut*, 2021).

Conclusion

This research aimed to determine the validity of claims stating that missing indigenous women had their cases covered in media less than missing white women, as well as why their coverage was disproportionately lower and how their lack of coverage affected their communities. While being subject to a higher rate of violence in their communities, coupled with the fact that their cases are covered disproportionately less than white women's cases, women in indigenous and their communities are facing a crisis. With many of these women being from rural reservation communities, they also lack the resources and authorities to properly assist and investigate their cases. This leads to a lack of trust and miscommunication between the indigenous community and authorities. When their cases aren’t reported or investigated properly by officials, this leads to cases without resolution and a lack of justice for the indigenous women and their families. When their cases are covered disproportionately less than white women, there is a lack of public knowledge of their cases and details due to the lack of media content surrounding their cases that reaches wider audiences beyond the indigenous communities. The

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lack of coverage of missing indigenous women's cases in the media sets a precedent that their cases are less “newsworthy” than the missing cases of white women.

The methodology used in the research provided qualitative and quantitative data related to missing persons cases and how they were covered differently (appearance in media searches, language used, time frame following disappearance, etc.). The research approaches outlined the contrast between media coverage of missing white women and missing indigenous women and how indigenous women received not only far less coverage, but the coverage they did receive often lacked details as well as a “humanness” factor when describing the women. This finding can be traced back to the idea of decoloniality theory and how the settler-colonialism mindset often pushes indigenous bodies to the back and focuses heavily on the modern world in which white individuals are seen of higher value and regard in today’s society. Using decoloniality theory provides a basis of understanding for readers to see the colonial structures of power and the emphasis of priority on white bodies. The basis of decoloniality theory provides an understanding on the naturally occurring “racial capitalism” and why society continues to exist in a state where indigenous bodies are less valued than white bodies. It’s important for readers to also understand the use of critical race theory as a tool to explain the historical context behind the lack of regard for the indigenous community. Critical race theory can provide a framework to outline not only the racial disparities between white women and indigenous women but can also be used to explain the socioeconomically disadvantaged indigenous community and how the lack of structure and appearance of violence in indigenous communities creates a disadvantage for urgency in investigations when indigenous women go missing. The results also emphasized the lack of diversity in many news organizations and the lack of advocates for indigenous women in the media sector.

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The research clearly shows the lack of coverage but raises the question of how media organizations can be held accountable in ensuring fair and equal coverage and representation moving forward. Based on these conclusions, it is important to promote diversity in newsrooms and media organizations across North America, as well as having advocates for underrepresented communities to ensure sufficient coverage of their cases. The research comparing the lack of coverage given to missing indigenous women versus the coverage given to missing white women outlines a key issue seen in mainstream media. It shows that the media continues to focus and place a higher emphasis on the lives of white women over the lives of indigenous women. This issue has to be brought to the attention of news organizations as an issue that not only affects the cases of missing indigenous women from the areas they report on, but also sets a precedent to other organizations and readers that indigenous lives don't matter as much as white lives. It's also paramount that media organizations cover each missing person's cases thoroughly and with precise detail regardless of the victim's race, occupation, social status, etc. Media organizations often frame these cases with details of the victims' pasts related to previous runaway attempts, drug use history, occupation as a sex worker, and other factors that point to victim blaming and discounting the importance of finding these women alive and well. It is essential for media groups to understand how visible these patterns are in the content they produce, as well as realize changes need to be made in order to ensure fair and equal representation for all missing people. Diversity in newsrooms continues to grow as we see far more women in broadcast journalism than we did a few decades ago, as well as more people of color in the industry. It's important that newsrooms look beyond just hiring women or minorities and expand their staff to include people from marginalized groups that have even less representation such as indigenous women, people with visible disabilities, etc. Diversifying the newsroom with people from marginalized

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communities provides a platform for those journalists to tell the stories of their communities that would not otherwise receive attention in the mainstream media. By newsrooms and media corporations ensuring fair and equal coverage of missing indigenous women as compared to missing white women, their cases are more likely to reach audiences, as well as gain the traction needed to solve their cases and bring justice to their families and communities. Further research in this field of study should explore the implications of special forces in police departments dedicated to investigating crimes involving marginalized groups. By dedicating a specific unit to investigating these crimes, it allows for more attention to be focused on investigations that are seemingly getting lost in the background. Further research in the area of media bias should also be extended to determine methods, such as designated reporters, dedicated to telling and covering the stories of underrepresented groups. While there have been a few podcasts released in recent years dedicated to covering cases of missing indigenous women (Finding Cleo, Missing and Murdered), other platforms such as news stations should consider moving in a direction of having a dedicated team to ensuring the fair and equal coverage of these missing women.

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