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To: The New York Times

Through: Native American Journalists Association

From: Eleanor Bishop

## **The Ethics of Reporting on Harmful Mascots (Learn from the Washington Post)**

### **Background**

Cherokee citizen and St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Ryan Hensley recently used his platform to speak to an issue that has plagued American native and nonnative relations for generations: the practice of using Native American imagery for sports team mascots. After a game in Georgia, Hensley called the Atlanta baseball team's "Tomahawk Chop" "disrespectful" and a "misrepresentation of the Cherokee people or Native Americans in general."

### **Purpose**

Mascots that depict caricatures of Native Americans or Native American culture are psychologically harmful. The American Psychological Association has [studied](#) the psychological effects of Native American mascots and has concluded that these mascots have a negative effects on the esteem of young Indigenous people and inspires and affirms negative stereotypes about Native American to their nonnative peers. The New York Times needs to understand this when reporting, because reinforcing or reiterating these stereotypes can further contribute to this phycological damage.

When mainstream news outlets report on Native American mascots, they often fall into similar, harmful patterns. When you cite surveys relating to Native American opinions on mascots, it is vital to understand how the data in these surveys was collected. For example, the Washington Post [reported](#) this year that nine out of 10 Native Americans were not offended by the Washington Red\*\*\*\*\*'s name. Wolverine, the company that collected the data cited in the article, allows participants to self-identity as Native American, ignoring each tribe's sovereign right to bestow tribal membership. Such data is inaccurate and harmful, and citing information from Wolverine and companies like it when reporting on mascots that depict Native American stereotypes contributes to the spread of misinformation that NAJA representatives are constantly fighting against.

### **Conclusion**

As a major publication with reach around the world, The New York Times has a responsibility to disseminate ethically collected, accurate information. This is not a question of impartiality, the way your staff reports on issues influences public perception—for better or worse. For the sake of your readers and Indigenous people as a whole, The New York Times must avoid reinforcing

physiologically harmful stereotypes or using inaccurate data when reporting on stories that deal with Native American imagery used as mascots.

### **Recommendations**

- Talk to an appropriate, Indigenous [source](#) during reporting
- Consult NAJA's style and reporting [guides](#) to ensure that articles use respectful and correct language and do not rely on clichés about American Indians
- Investigate the source of all data before publishing to ensure it was collected accurately and ethically
- Seek out newsroom-wide training on best practices for reporting on Indigenous communities