

[Opinion] Striking through Redskins Bigotry: A Media Call to Action

Certain terms are simply not fit for media to print. The *N-word* is one. The *F-bomb* is another. Words like these pack such a strong semantic punch that society created new terms just to reference them.

~~Redskins~~ is yet another word unfit for print or any use at all for that matter. It is a racial slur that almost every modern dictionary recognizes as such. The term's history is deeply intertwined with the systematic genocide of millions of Native Americans.

One doesn't have to dig deep into the annals of history to demonstrate numerous less-than-forgiving past usages by the media alone.

An article from the Daily Republican, a newspaper based in Winona, Minn., published Sept. 29, 1862, reads, "The removal of the entire race of ~~redskins~~ has become an imperative necessity, and we trust that it will be pressed upon the Government until the work is accomplished. Otherwise the depopulation of a large portion of the State must be the unwelcome alternative. This should not be permitted, if every Indian in the State has to be consigned to a 'hospitable grave.'"

Likewise, an ad in the Sept. 25, 1863, edition of the same newspaper reads, "The State reward for dead Indians has been increased to \$200 for every ~~red-skin~~ sent to Purgatory. This sum is more than the dead bodies of all the Indians east of the Red River are worth." Keep in mind that the average Union civil war soldier in 1863 made less than \$20 a month, which means that \$200 was small fortune then, and equivalent to

about \$3,800 in 2018.

Such examples remind us why the term ~~redskins~~ carries a significant amount of bigoted baggage. The term was not used as a racial compliment, but rather operated as a genocidal semantic-enabler.

Growing Protests to the Term

According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, 76 media organizations and journalists either support a name change or are no longer using the term. Twelve media outlets have banned the term out right, including newspapers such as the Oregonian, Seattle Times, Kansas City Star and San Francisco Chronicle.

The editorial board at the Washington Post followed suit in 2014 when its members announced they would no longer use the term in writing, "While we wait for the National Football League to catch up with thoughtful opinion and common decency, we have decided that, except when it is essential for clarity or effect, we will no longer use the slur ourselves."

Likewise, California became the first state to ban the use of ~~redskins~~ as a school team name or as a mascot by enacting the California Racial Mascots Act in 2015. California's Assembly Bill No. 30 reads, "The use of racially derogatory or discriminatory school or athletic team names, mascots, or nicknames in California public schools is antithetical to the California school mission of providing an equal education to all."

Although these advancements represent critical steps forward, there have been recent legal setbacks as well. The United States Supreme Court's July 2017 decision that rejected the disparagement clause of federal trademark law represents a major win for the Washington ~~Redskins~~ by recognizing that the First Amendment protects its right as an organization to name its team whatever it deems fit.

“Speech that demeans on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, or any other similar ground is hateful; but the proudest boast of our free speech jurisprudence is that we protect the freedom to express ‘the thought that we hate,’” wrote Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr., in a unanimous decision.

Objectivity or Linguistic Decorum?

Journalists maintain some of the highest standards for the written use of English language, and have a more nuanced understanding of its inner workings than does much of the population. Still, many media organizations continue to use the term ~~redskins~~. Rather than be accused of diminished objectivity, some journalists believe omitting the term is worse than reporting a potentially offensive team name. Journalists often defer to their media organizations for guidance when objectivity and linguistic decorum collide.

When the Washington Post’s editorial board decided against using the name, the news-gathering side kept it. “The Post’s newsroom and the editorial page operate independently of each other,” Executive Editor Martin Baron said in a 2014 interview for his paper. “Standard operating policy in the newsroom has been to use the names that established institutions choose for themselves. That remains our policy, as we continue to vigorously cover controversy over the team’s name and avoid any advocacy role on this subject.”

Unfortunately, valuing objectivity over linguistic decorum does not support the media’s ideal of being the watchdog over society, nor does it allow the media to alleviate itself of its responsibility to promote common decency. In this manner, media companies and industry organizations such as the Associated Press need to realize their inaction is nothing more than the perpetuation of the status quo, and that they are just as responsible for the current situation as are the journalists reporting the name.

If an industry organization such as the Associated Press were to ban the use of ~~redskins~~, it would drastically reduce the objectivity concerns of individual reporters forced to decide between linguistic decorum or objectivity. In these cases, it would remove the concerns of “diminished” objectivity from journalists and place it on their media company and/or the industry organizations to which their company adheres.

Furthermore, objectivity would be better served through the omission of the term altogether, rather than through its use. Unless in a direct quotation, journalists do not use any other racial slur with the frequency or intensity as they do ~~redskins~~. From a linguistic perspective, the use of ~~redskins~~ is more subjective than objective. It would be more objective to avoid all racial slurs in reporting rather than subjectively deciding some slurs are allowable if already in the commercial marketplace. In other words, it would be more objective to avoid the entire category rather than justify the use of one or two.

Silence through Omission Is Not the Solution

For the term ~~redskins~~ to ultimately be discarded from society’s lexicon, it will first require a change in the Washington Redskins name. Based on Washington Redskins’ Owner Dan Snyder’s commitment to the term, this type of change will not come easily, and it will take time. It will require more than a couple media organizations boycotting the term. Instead, it requires a systemic solution where every opportunity to strike through the term is seized.

It will require a proactive protest and not a protest of silence through omission. Journalists must first take ownership of the term and not only use it as a weapon against Dan Snyder and its semantic supporters, but also utilize it as an educational opportunity with the general public. Current media protests omitting the term ~~redskins~~ would be more effective by striking through it instead. In doing so, it

allows the media to recognize the First Amendment and Dan Snyder's right to name his team whatever he wants, but it also allows the media to highlight the term's offensiveness by explicitly drawing attention to the term's semantic baggage.

This is a resolution to the journalist's ethical dilemma, or double-bind, where journalists may have to use the term in their reporting, but object to it. It allows journalists to take ownership of the term by framing it as morally objectionable to their reader, rather than avoiding the term.

Additionally, striking through the term allows for continued discussion where omission prevents it. Assuming the term "Washington Redskins" is probably mentioned five to six times in the average article after a game, its visual effect would be striking and its impact impossible to ignore.

On the other hand, a reader might not even realize when the term is not being used by a media outlet protesting it. Unless one types "~~redskins~~ and editorial" into the search bar on Washington Post's website, there is no way to know the editorial department is protesting the term. Based on the term's usage on the website alone, the editorial department, if anything, is being visually silenced by its news-gathering counterpart. Striking out the term explicitly calls attention to the problem, while omission can only call attention effectually through the term's absence. In the case of the Washington Post, in order for a protest of omission to work, the entire organization would have to adhere to the same standard.

Is Striking through ~~Redskins~~ a Solution in Name Only?

The continued use of ~~redskins~~, even with a strikethrough, might be problematic to some because it requires using the very term it seeks to avoid. However, this temporary usage could help eradicate the term from society's lexicon permanently.

One thing is certain: ~~Redskins~~ is different than other racial slurs in that a professional sports team has a vested interest in keeping the term relevant. As long as the NFL remains as popular as it is today, the term – if left unchecked – will continue to dominate the media landscape. Unlike other racial slurs, journalists and media outlets are forced to either report the news as objectively as possible or avoid using the term in good conscience.

Once the Washington ~~Redskins~~ were to switch its name to a non-racial slur, there would be no need to continue striking through the term, in part, because it would no longer be printed in the pages of every major daily newspaper.

Most media organizations have been standing on the sidelines regarding ~~redskins~~ for far too long. It's time for a Colin Kaepernick-like media kneel-down for Native Americans. A media protest of silence through omission, or worse, indifference, is simply not enough.