

Redskins and Chief Wahoo – What's a journalist to do?

How should the media portray Indian nicknames and logos? Before even going there, consider:

- A few years ago a journalist telephoned the chief of Minnesota's Ojibwa Nation. He told the chief he was reporting on Native American gambling. The chief immediately responded, "Stop right there. Only you liberal white boys call us 'Native Americans.' It's 'Indians,' got it?"

- A young woman from a Midwest Indian reservation was asked in a college class what she thought about the Cleveland Indians baseball cap with the toothy, red-skinned, feather-bedecked "Chief Wahoo" logo. She responded, "That's the most popular cap on our reservation; it's worn by lots of kids. We know the logo's stereotypical. We're not stupid. What's the big f***ing deal?"

- The Red Mesa Arizona Indian reservation was among some 70 high school "Redskins" in the United States cited by the National Football League Washington team in March when it defended its name.

Increasingly, Americans are critical of the name "Redskins," and for many this term is just as offensive as would be a sports team with the name "Kikes" or "Chinks" or "Pakis" or "Wops" or "N*****."

Even the more benign sports-team names such as "Indians" and "Chiefs" and "Braves" are questionable when considering that no newly minted 21st century sports teams would have nicknames such as the:

- San Francisco Chinese • New York Jews □ • Atlanta Blacks □ • Southwest Hispanics • Vermont Whites

But if it's sometimes unclear what a franchise should call or how it should depict its sports team in the modern era, it can be just as difficult for a media organization.

The truth-telling tradition would have media and journalism companies simply report the situation as it is – “Redskins” would be repeated when referring to teams with that name; team logos, including the Cleveland Indian's “Chief Wahoo” insignia, would be the team symbol used when listing sports scores in newspapers.

Indeed, this is what the vast number of media operations do when faced with sports nicknames and symbols that are anything from questionable to inappropriate.

On the other hand, the Portland Oregonian in 1992 dropped the team names Redskins, Braves, Indians and Redmen from its sports pages. Instead, it referred to those teams by league and city. Also in that year WTOP- AM and sister radio station WASH-FM in Washington, D.C., decided to no longer use “Redskins” and other Indian team names.

Two years later the Star Tribune (Minneapolis) banned Indian nicknames to describe sports teams. As a result, when the Atlanta Braves played the Cleveland Indians for the 1995 World Series, the Star Tribune's sport pages reported play between the Atlanta baseball team and the Cleveland baseball team. When that new policy was leaked to local talk radio stations and subsequently reported in the Star Tribune, many dozens of readers canceled subscriptions and the newsroom received death threats.

“My sports staff was not happy and criticism came from many quarters. Among other things, we were accused of being self-aggrandizing,” said then-editor Tim McGuire.

Across the Mississippi River in St. Paul, the Pioneer-Press, which had no such name change policy, reported the 1995 series using “Braves” and “Indians,” and readers subscribing to both

daily newspapers saw the difference. (The Star Tribune's sports-team nickname policy was reversed in 2003 under a new editor.)

Earlier this year the Seattle Times print and Web editions banned the use of "Redskins." The newspaper's sports editor was quoted as saying, "We're banning the name for one reason: It's offensive. Far from honoring Native Americans, the term colors an entire race. Many Native Americans consider it an outdated label placed on their people."

This spring the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board ruled the Washington Redskins team's name and logo to be disparaging. The effect of this ruling, though, is largely symbolic as it cannot prevent the team from selling T-shirts or other paraphernalia, or from trying to defend itself against those attempting to profit from the logo.

While the Washington professional football franchise may or may not decide to change its "Redskins" nickname, a quiet logo change is taking place in Cleveland, where the Cleveland Indians website now lists Chief Wahoo as its "primary logo" from "1951 to 2013," and as its "2014- secondary logo." A red box-style "C" logo is listed as "primary logo 2014- ," and as its secondary logo from 2008 to 2013.

But then, Chief Wahoo has slowly been exiting for 20 years now. In 1994 the 28-foot- high "full-body Chief Wahoo" Indians logo was donated to Cleveland's Western Reserve Historical Society. The neon-lit logo had shone brightly above the city's Municipal Stadium Gate D for more than 30 years, but was quietly decommissioned and did not make the transition to (then) Jacobs Field. It now is relegated to the museum's lobby in Cuyahoga County, once home to a variety of Indian tribes, including Wyandot, Huron Shawnee, Miami and Delaware. Indeed it was the Indian word for "crooked" that gave the Cuyahoga River its name.

But this all begs the question – How should the media respond today?

Should they simply report what's happening, or not happening, with sports nickname and logo changes, or should they risk being labeled “politically correct” and ban offensive nicknames and logos? However the media react – or don't react – it is bound to make news, as it should.

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