

Ashley Cordes sees culture in Native American currency

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Story by Randy Newnham

The person who coined the phrase “money talks” probably didn’t mean it in the way Ashley Cordes sees it. She is someone who searches for the deeper meaning in everyday things — like money.

“I think studying currency as a form of communication tells us a lot about power, even though it’s often taken for granted,” said Cordes, a doctoral candidate in the UO School of Journalism and Communication’s [Media Studies PhD program](#). “When people think about media and communication, they tend to think of mass media like newspapers, television and radio. While these may be pervasive, currency is perhaps the most ‘mass’ because it reaches the majority of the public and is used by most people almost every day.”



Cordes grew up in Simi Valley, California. But her family’s connection to the Coquille Tribe, whose nation is near Coos Bay, drew her back to Oregon to cultivate those roots.

Cordes serves the Coquille nation as chair of the Culture and Education Committee. Her academic work has earned her the [Margaret Weise Graduate Research Award](#), which supports graduate student research related to preserving the culture, language and artifacts of northwestern Native Americans.

As a media researcher, Cordes has studied how groups communicate their identities through media, with a focus on currency as a communication medium among Native American populations. Her research covers early currencies and bartering items like coppers, beads and shells, as well as the more recent [MazaCoin](#), a cryptocurrency originally intended for use by the Oglala Lakota nation.

[MazaCoin’s creator](#), Payu Harris, wants it to eventually replace the U.S. dollar as the official currency of Oglala Lakota, while others hope it will expand to other indigenous nations. Although this currency’s future is unknown, it still communicates the values and visuals important to its developer and his culture.

This symbolism is what interests Cordes.

“Just like American coins are decorated with faces of U.S. presidents and colonial signifiers, cryptocurrency visuals are designed with iconography that expresses important meanings of the nation, company or individual designing it,” she said. “I have been reading these visuals as texts, just like other forms of media can be read. I’m finding that indigenous cryptocurrencies in particular have a lot of visual markers that speak back to their creationist stories, sacred land, great leaders and treaties broken by U.S. governments in the 1800s.”

Cordes’ passion is communication research, and she plans to pursue a career in academia after completing her PhD.

“I absolutely love teaching and helping students,” she said. “Getting to do meaningful research augments that experience.”

Randy Newnham, a senior majoring in public relations in the UO School of Journalism and Communication, would rather be pulling espresso shots and playing board games. But the world needs at least one more social media manager, and Randy has risen to the challenge. Together, with the plucky band of underdogs that is his family, Randy fights dirty for social justice. You can find him on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) and in various coffee shops around Eugene.

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