Native Print Journalism in the United States: Dreams and Realities

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Cet article étudie le développement des journaux indiens aux Etats-Unis et en retrace l'histoire depuis plus de 150 ans. L'auteur évalue la contribution des premiers journalistes indiens, et examine les ressemblances et les différences entre les premiers journaux indiens et les journaux contemporains ainsi que les problèmes que ces journalistes ont affrontés. Elle voit dans la capacité d'adaptation de la presse indienne (prise dans son ensemble), aux influences sociales et politiques un gage de vitalité pour l'avenir.

This article examines the development of native American newspapers in the United States and traces their history for over 150 years. The contributions of pioneer native journalists, similarities and differences between early and contemporary native newspapers, and the problems faced by native journalists are discussed. The fluidity which has generally characterized the response of the native press to social and political influences is seen as a guarantee of its future vitality.

INTRODUCTION

Well over a century and a half ago, a newspaper called the *Cherokee Phoenix* appeared in what is now Calhoun County, Georgia. This was the first in a series of newspapers published by and for native Americans.

The primary tasks of early native newspapers were educational, and they furthered survival in a world which was increasingly dominated by non-Indians. A survey of these early newspapers gives the impression that their editors felt that it was only a matter of time before tribal lands would be surrounded and stolen. To survive the imminent collision of cultures, Indians would need to be able to read, write, and converse in the language of non-Indian society. Early native newspapers offered news, information, and advertising, and they also alerted readers to dangers to themselves and their communities. When they circulated in varying degrees among non-Indians, native newspapers offered alternative views of Indian life and accomplishments.

As was the case for its non-Indian counterpart, the early history of the native American press was characterized by infrequent publication, primitive formats and content, high mortality rates, and minimal staffs and resources. In addition, there was substantial bilingual or even trilingual content in several early native newspapers printed in English as well as in Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and eventually, Creek. Unlike non-Indian publications, Indian newspapers were imperilled by government policies or whims which might displace or decimate an entire readership before a paper could establish itself.

Pioneer native American publications were usually the official organs of tribal governments. Consequently, their editors often shaped editorial policy to promote the interests of the tribes they served. Even today, this same editorial shaping operates in many tribal newspapers, although a growing awareness of the need for freedom of the press is evident among tribal leaders. Despite tribal controls and sponsorship, early native newspapers were politically outspoken and often invited dispute and controversy. This practice sometimes led to name-calling and libel suits. In typical frontier style, it also sometimes led to physical violence and, in at least one instance, to murder.

In the southeastern United States, the Five Civilized Tribes included the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles. The first four of these constituted the center of early native journalism. Cherokees were the most active journalists, and only the Seminoles had no newspapers. Although many early tribal publications were initiated by or at least sponsored by religious missions scattered throughout "Indian country," most Indian newspapers began as a result of tribal efforts. The educational value of Indian publications was generally recognized by both Indian leaders and non-Indian government officials (Murphy and Murphy 1981; Foreman 1936).

Early native American newspapers served other functions as well. They advertised schools and hotels, publicized the settling of estates, announced postal schedules and unclaimed letters, printed steamboat schedules and merchants' sales lists, promoted patent-medicine companies, and recorded newly-enacted laws. They campaigned for law and order, warned women of dangers to their persons, and encouraged temperance. They also helped to establish towns by carrying advertisements to attract homesteaders. In general, they informed and supported the Indian nations.

The first Indian newspapers averaged between four and sixteen pages in length, and were about fifteen by twenty-four inches in size. Circulations ranged from a hundred to a thousand readers, and subscriptions cost between one and three dollars per year, often payable in advance. Like many of their non-Indian counterparts, the quality of these newspapers was uneven. Often, they criticized one another in their columns. For example, one editor wrote that his rival's newspaper needed "some fixin'," and that the "entire paper has the appearance of having been printed on a hand press and in an awful hurry" (College Paper March 4, 1904. Stillwater, Oklahoma: Oklahoma State University of Agriculture and Applied Science).

THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF THE *CHEROKEE PHOENIX*

The *Cherokee Phoenix* played a major role in early Indian journalism. Founded on February 21, 1828, it was printed partly in English and partly in Cherokee and used the eighty-six character syllabic alphabet developed by Sequoyah, a Cherokee silversmith also known as George Guess or Gist. Efforts to establish this newspaper originated out of a combination of religious and political needs. On the one hand, missionaries recognized the potential of the printed word for "civilizing" and "uplifting" the Cherokees. On the other hand, the Cherokee Na-

tional Council was aware of the role which an accelerated educational program could play in its fight for survival. To counter non-Indian encroachment on their homelands, the Cherokees needed to learn to use non-Indian weapons. Through the medium of a newspaper, the Cherokee National Council hoped to unify opinion in the Cherokee nation and to gain outside support for Cherokee rights to their homelands.

With this in mind, the Cherokee National Council commissioned Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee school teacher, council clerk, and New England-educated missionary, to begin an intensive fund-raising effort to support a newspaper venture. Boudinot travelled throughout the east coast of the United States, speaking before philanthropic and church groups. At the same time, the Cherokee National Council committed $1,500.00 of tribal funds to finance the purchase of a press and type.

Especially during its early history, the four-page *Phoenix* (in Cherokee, *Tsa-la-ge-tsi-hi-sa-ni-hi*) was a focal point of the Cherokee nation. It portrayed the standards of Cherokee civilization, discussed problems and politics, and reflected the most persistent issues of Cherokee life. In addition, it informed people about the early phases of the controversy over government removal of Indians from their ancestral lands to Indian territory in Oklahoma. This controversy, and the political factions within the Cherokee Nation which grew up around it, set the stage for the decline of the newspaper, the death of Boudinot at Cherokee hands, and serious misfortunes for the Cherokee Nation.

On May 31, 1834, publication of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was suspended, ostensibly for financial reasons, but in reality because of Cherokee uncertainty and dissension regarding the threat of removal and the newspaper's role vis-à-vis this threat. Indeed, Boudinot had resigned as editor in 1832 because he advocated removal as the only viable hope for Cherokee survival, a viewpoint which was at odds with official Cherokee policy. On August 11, 1832, Boudinot had written in farewell, "I cannot tell them (the Cherokees) that we shall be reinstated in our rights when I have no such hope." It was not until 1843, following the disastrous "Trail of Tears," when Cherokees were forced to march from Georgia to what would later become Oklahoma Territory, that another Cherokee national newspaper was established. This publication, the *Cherokee Advocate*, first appeared on September 26, 1844 and was followed by two collegiate newspapers in 1848 and 1855.

OTHER NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEWSPAPERS

The early work of three other tribes also deserves mention. The Choctaws, who had been forced from their Mississippi homelands in the early 1830s, established the *Choctaw Telegraph* in 1848. Other Choctaw papers soon followed. In 1854, the *Chickasaw Intelligencer* appeared in Tishomingo City, capital of the Chickasaw Nation in Indian Territory (later southern Oklahoma). The *Chickasaw Intelligencer* ushered in a brief period of journalism which was interrupted by

the outbreak of the American Civil War. The war forced southeastern Indians into another losing stance where some of the wealthier were, or had been, slaveholders. Although southeastern Indian chiefs and leaders had urged a policy of neutrality, northerners commonly believed that "southern" Indians were pro-Confederacy. In reality, this belief offered a handy excuse for indigent non-Indians to covet lands and properties which had been ceded to southern Indians by treaties. During the years of the Civil War, Indian publications were suspended, bowing to various pressures and sometimes to forced government action. These publications were then reactivated during the reconstruction of the South.

Among the Indian newspapers established during this second phase of native journalism were the reactivated *Cherokee Advocate* (1879), the *Choctaw Vindicator* (1872), the *Atoka Independent* (1877), the Caddo Indian *Free Press* (1878), the *Indian Champion* (1884), the *Indian Citizen* (1886), and the *Tahlequah Telephone* (1887). The Creek Nation's influential and controversial *Indian Progress* appeared on October 22, 1875, promising in its inaugural issue to educate citizens so that they would "not fall an easy prey to scheming demagogues and plausible villains."

Other tribes also ventured into print. Through the Baptist Mission Press, the Shawnee Sioux published the *Siwinowe Kesibwi* (*Shawnee Sun*) as early as 1835. A little over four decades later, in 1878, the *Cheyenne Transporter* began publication on the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation in Darlington, Indian Territory (later the state of Oklahoma). The *Osage Herald* first appeared in 1875 as a Saturday publication, and was followed in 1910 by the *Cheyenne and Arapaho Carrier Pigeon*. Most of these newspapers served as general interest publications, offering community information and advertising, while at the same time playing the role of watchdog and crusader.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY PUBLICATIONS

Other, more militant publications were also established after the turn of the century. One of these, the *Quarterly Journal* published by the Society of American Indians, included works by most of the major Indian writers and scholars of the day. This Washington, D.C.-based publication appeared in 1912, and was followed soon afterward by the *American Indian Magazine*, a national magazine focusing on Indians as a race rather than as a mere collection of disparate and competing tribes. About four years later, a newspaper called *Wassaja* was established in 1916. *Wassaja* used the slogan "Let My People Go," and promoted native enfranchisement, greater assimilation into American culture and society, and less emphasis on reservations. Another Washington, D.C. publication titled the *NCAI Bulletin* served as the newsletter of the National Congress of American Indians and opposed federal government policies aimed at terminating reservations and the reservation rights of Indians. Established in 1947, the pioneer role of the *NCAI Bulletin* resembled that of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. By mid-century, there were newsletters and newspapers on reservations across the United States, as well as in urban areas with substantial Indian populations. The *New Cherokee Advocate* was re-

established at the Cherokee national capital in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in 1950. Examples of urban publications were the Los-Angeles-based *Talking Leaf* which began in 1935, and *Smoke Signals*, begun in Sacramento, California in 1947.

Following World War II, a new era of expansion in Indian journalism resulted in about 400 currently operating publications. Among these are Alaska native publications which were established and have blossomed in the last thirty years (Murphy 1982). These have included the *Voice of Brotherhood*, which was begun in 1954 as an advocate of native rights and well-being, the *Sealaska Shareholder*, the *Tundra Times*, and the *All-Alaska Weekly*, all of which have generally been more sophisticated than Indian publications elsewhere in the United States. The sophistication of these publications may be attributed to both historical circumstances and to the fact that in Alaska, native people have not had the same reservation status as Indians in other states. Since the late nineteenth century, native Alaskans have attended public schools, competed for political office, and participated in the economic life of the area. Thus, they have been generally better prepared for the business and professional challenges of journalism than other native Americans. This statement is not intended to underestimate the challenges of native journalism in Alaska, but rather to put its accomplishments in perspective.

In late March 1984, the twenty-five year old *Navajo Times*, established in 1959, became a daily newspaper. After initially serving as a monthly, education-oriented paper, the *Navajo Times* gradually matured into a full-fledged, general-interest community newspaper. Today, it is still in the first stages of development as a daily newspaper, having shut down for several weeks in mid-April, 1984 due to problems with equipment and facilities.

The *Navajo Times* is part of a significant and diversified American Indian network of publications which arose during the 1970s and 1980s. This network encompasses newspapers in at least two-thirds of the United States, including several papers which claim national and international distribution and readership, scores of Indian high school and college publications, papers by prison culture groups, several scholarly and special interest publications, legal and financial publications, and literary magazines.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIVE PUBLICATIONS

Native newspapers may appear weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly, or even irregularly. They can be tribal, inter-tribal, urban, or regional in scope and affiliation. Their staffs may include skilled and experienced journalists, rank amateurs, and every level of skills in between. Staff members of native publications may be paid, underpaid, or volunteers. Although today's native press is almost entirely in the English language, growing numbers of editors are attempting to include short sections or articles in tribal languages. Factors which work against bilingualism for native publications include a lack of systematically prepared grammars, the occasional lack of specially-designed type fonts, and often, a lack of writers and typesetters who are skilled in tribal languages.

Few native newspapers could be considered money-making ventures. Most got their start and continue to exist only through various forms of tribal, educational, or governmental subsidies. Although a few native newspapers are financially independent, most are shoestring operations. As a result, many have short life spans, erratic formats and publication schedules, and extremely limited staffs. They may be inexpensively published, sometimes appearing as mimeographed, legal-sized sheets which are stapled together by volunteer hands. A popular format for native publications is the monthly newsprint tabloid of twelve to sixteen pages, closely resembling a small town weekly. Today, increasing attention is being given to advertising in order to help meet rising costs and to make native newspapers less dependent on tribal subsidies.

Another noteworthy characteristic is that the style and conventions of many native newspapers often differ from the so-called objective news reporting of the established non-Indian press. Stories in the native press are frequently written from an Indian viewpoint and may be unabashedly laced with the personal opinions of reporters and editors. Editorials, letters to editors, and political cartoons may leave no doubt as to where writers and editors stand on various issues. Of course, major native newspapers and influential native journalists are making many serious efforts to stress quality writing, professional reporting, and writing "in a colorblind fashion for the undefined reader" (LaCourse 1982:117). However, biases which exist in the work of all journalists are often more openly manifested in native journalism.

At the same time, increasing attention is being paid to complicated issues and careful analysis. Native newspapers have an acknowledged, historical mission which they alone can fulfill. This mission is to correct or put into perspective Indian news which is misinterpreted or ignored by the majority non-Indian press. Some of the areas of news reporting which are relevant to this mission include legal affairs, politics and government, education, health, culture and heritage, language preservation, entertainment, and the interracial situations created by reservation borders that are also frequently peripheral zones of violence. The impetus which native newspapers offer for the survival of self-pride and tribal identity suggests that they are essential. D'Arcy McNickle, the highly-respected Flathead Indian and anthropologist, called native newspapers a decisive force in creating an enduring policy of self-determined cultural pluralism (1973:169).

By the mid-1960s, he emergence of Indian legal publications represented another avenue for self-determination to which the native press had responded. Rose Robinson of the Washington, D.C.-based Phelps Stokes Foundation has called Indian journalists "chroniclers of their own contemporary history" (Medium Rare: Indian Communications Newsletter 1973 1(5 August-September):2. Washington, D.C.: American Indian Press Association News Bureau). Despite the importance of communication and training for the profession of native journalism, there is still a lack of visible incentives for young Indians to pursue journalism as a career. Salaries for work on native publications are generally low, and in most cases, Indian tribes cannot pay competitive salaries which would attract and keep

top editorial talent. Thus, the incentives for long hours of thankless work must come from other sources besides money.

During interviews in the 1970s and early 1980s, most native American editors could identify few, if any, journalistic role models for young Indians who might be in the process of choosing careers. The powerful newspapers which young Indians were reading seldom carried native bylines, and none had native editors. At that time, radio and television programs featured few, if any, Indians. As was the case for other minority groups, the white-dominated mass media and educational institutions were seen as lacking an interest in prospective Indian journalists and in the needs of native Americans in general, even when they could point to efforts at recruitment. Simultaneously, tribal newspapers acknowledged their inability to offer competitive opportunities for native journalists.

Beyond financial and career considerations, there are continuing tensions between the interests of Indian tribes and freedom of the press as guaranteed by both the United States Constitution and the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968. The Indian Civil Rights Act contains a fundamental guarantee of freedom of the press for Indian tribes, and also emphasizes that freedom of expression within reasonable limits, excepting obscenity, libel, and slander, applies to all Indians whether they are on or off reservations. Richard LaCourse, a scholar of the Indian press, has stated that "Freedom of the press is a burgeoning actuality within the legal documents of Indian tribes" (1982:105). Furthermore, native editors acknowledge the tensions they experience when criticizing tribal leadership or other aspects of Indian life. Many of these editors admit to being torn between self-censorship and the free marketplace of ideas. As one native editor told a researcher, "Yes, this is a mouthpiece for the tribe. Maybe I'm knuckling under sometimes, but when you think of the greater good (which is accomplished by self-censorship), you do it." Another editor, whose paper was controlled by the Board of Directors of an intertribal corporation said, "When it comes to leading strong campaigns, we must tread very carefully." This editor happened to be involved in just such a campaign at the time, and his paper folded not long after he made his comment (for a further discussion of freedom of the press vis-à-vis native journalists, see LaCourse 1982).

In working toward effective communication systems, native editors and tribal leaders have explored cooperative efforts such as media associations and regional advertising ventures. Examples of cooperative efforts include the American Indian Press Association, which was nationally active from 1970 to 1975; a subscription news service called the Northwest Indian News Association, which was begun in 1978; the Southwest Indian Media Collective, which was begun in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1977 as a service for subscribers in Arizona and New Mexico; the Southern Plains Indian Media Association, and a cooperative advertising venture called the Indian Newspaper Publishers Association, which originated in the state of Washington in 1977. That same year also marked the beginning of annual Indian media conferences of print journalists, broadcasters, and video communications specialists. In the early 1980s, efforts were announced for a national Indian newspaper modeled on both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New*

York Times, which would be published in Washington, D.C. and serve as a syndicated news service. In 1980, the Alaska Native Media Association, initially representing sixteen native publications and several freelance journalists, was established in Anchorage, Alaska. Formal planning for a Native American Press Association to facilitate cooperation among print journalists, with initial funding from the Gannett Foundation, was begun in 1984.

Both the history and the current circumstances of native print journalism in the United States offer many examples of courage and determination. At times, the native press has faced insurmountable odds. One of its most central characteristics has been the fluidity of its response to changing needs and conditions, and to economic, social, and political pressures. While fluidity may endanger growth, it may also guarantee the vitality of responsive growth. Native American print journalism has made many important contributions to North American life. Judging from its current directions, it promises even greater contributions in the decades ahead.

NOTES

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In discussing efforts of the early native American press in the United States, one must acknowledge the work of related, though non-Indian, mission, school, and agency presses and publications in the educational and often sentinel efforts described here.

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