

Native Broadcasting in Canada

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Cet article étudie les tentatives récentes pour créer des postes de radio-diffusion et de télé-diffusion autochtones au Canada. Les émissions de "trail" et la radio communautaire fournissent le modèle initial. Le Programme d'accès aux émissions pour les autochtones du nord (NNBAP—Northern Native Broadcast Access Program) subventionné par le Secrétariat d'Etat, favorise des améliorations. Durant les dernières années, les annonceurs autochtones ont fait preuve d'initiative et ont réussi à relever le défi que présente la discussion des problèmes autochtones pour un auditoire autochtone habitué à la programmation commerciale, axée sur le divertissement, en provenance des Etats-Unis et des régions méridionales du Canada.

This article examines recent efforts to create native radio and television stations in Canada. In the beginning, trail and community radio provided the initial model for native Canadian broadcasting. Eventually, the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program, sponsored by the Native Citizens Directorate of the Secretary of State, led to further developments. In the last few years, native Canadian broadcasters have created many innovations and have successfully confronted the challenge of presenting serious discussions of native issues to a native audience which was previously accustomed to commercial, light-entertainment programing from southern Canada and the United States.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s, an Alberta entrepreneur named Eugene Steinhauer launched what eventually became Canada's first native communications society. Until then, native Canadian journalism had largely taken the form of printed publications.

Steinhauer's creation became known as the Alberta Native Communications Society (ANCS). By the 1970s, the ANCS was the highest profile native communications organization in Canada. In 1970, when its provincial funding base was widened and it received federal funding, the ANCS quickly expanded into print. Throughout most of its history and despite much-publicized and highly-financed forays into radio and television, the enduring and uninterrupted communications vehicle of the ANCS remained its newspaper, *The Native Voice*. Even during its heyday, when the ANCS experimented with the distribution of television by satellite and with production for several public and private broadcasting outlets in Alberta, the content of its programs was more heavily oriented toward culture and entertainment than toward news and public affairs. In the early 1980s, internal politics and insufficient administration led to an untimely end for the ANCS.

To date, most native communications societies in Canada have eventually been funded by the federal Secretary of State, and most have had a print rather

than a broadcast orientation. One of the factors contributing to this print orientation is financial. In any type of radio broadcasting, quality news and public affairs programming is extremely expensive to produce, particularly when time must be rented from licensed broadcasters. A single half-hour of quality news and information programming for radio usually requires an average of five hours of taped recordings during production. For this reason, few private radio stations in Canada produce quality news programming, despite the legislated mandate of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) to call broadcasters into account for their services. The cost of quality news and public affairs programming for television is even more expensive. As a general rule, television production is about eight times more expensive than radio, a fact which makes the cost of television prohibitive for most native communications organizations.

By contrast, print journalism is far cheaper than radio and television. In fact, newspaper publishing is an exception to the rule that most technological advances in North America have *not* been more economical than older technologies. The reason for this is that the photographic process used in modern offset printing has eliminated manual typesetting and page composition, both of which were formerly the most labor-intensive and costly processes in printing. Thus, current native print journalism has been made possible by a new, less-expensive printing technology which makes newspapers relatively cheap to produce. As a result, several native publications with shoestring budgets due to minimal government funding have managed to offer timely and informative publications with news, feature articles, and especially photographs. Characteristically, many of these publications have relied on black-and-white presentations of public opinion on political issues.

Examples of current native Canadian publications are *The Native Press*, serving the Dené and Métis in the Western Arctic, and *Wawatay News*, serving the Ojibwa and Cree in northwestern Ontario. Due to an emphasis on training and staff upgrading, these publications have come of age in approximately the last five years despite constant staff turnovers and the need to train existing staffs. The *Yukon Indian News*, published in Whitehorse, Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) by the YeSaTo Native Communications Society, and the *Micmac News*, published in Sydney (Memebertou), Nova Scotia by the Nova Scotia Native Communications Society, have also shown marked improvement in journalistic understanding and quality. The now discontinued *Ontario Indian*, which was published in Toronto, was generally of high quality when it had a secure financial base. Its successor, *Sweetgrass*, had national ambitions.

THE QUALITY OF NATIVE BROADCASTING

Little of the journalistic quality of native publications has been evident in the radio and television produced by native Canadians. One exception to this has been the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), which has produced quality programming of its own and has also provided a showcase for quality television programming produced by another Inuit organization, the Taqramuit Nipingat, Incor-

porated of Salluit, Québec (see also the article in this volume by Debbie Brisebois titled "The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation"). IBC programming is distributed throughout the North via the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's satellite channel which is uplinked from the IBC facility in Frobisher Bay, N.W.T. Neither the IBC nor the Taqramuit Nipingat, Incorporated has consistently produced quality television news and public affairs programming with a strong graphic effect. To date, most of the news and public affairs programming produced by these two organizations has been of a "radio-on-TV" variety, incorporating either studio interviews and scripted news read by an announcer, or lengthy, relatively unedited interviews carried out on location and accompanied by a limited amount of graphic film footage. Among television journalists, this is scornfully called "talking heads"—i.e., television without the pictures that *really* tell "the story."

The Indian News Media, an organization which publishes the *Kanai News* in Standoff, Alberta on the Blood Indian Reserve, has often broadcast interesting news and public affairs programs on Blackfoot Radio. Some of these programs have been aired in southern Alberta by private broadcasters. For the most part, particularly in the North, radio news and public affairs programming has been largely delegated to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. An exception to this rule is the Wawatay Native Communications Society in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, whose native language radio network is distributed by satellite through an arrangement with TV Ontario.

For a considerable length of time, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) has made serious attempts to broadcast native language information programs in the North. In the Eastern Arctic, beginning with Frobisher Bay, N.W.T., and gradually expanding into other broadcast centers, CBC radio programming has consistently presented over fifty percent of its content in Inuktitut (the Inuit language). More recently in the Western Arctic, virtually all CBC afternoon programming originating from Yellowknife and Inuvik, N.W.T. has been produced by a native crew and has been broadcast in the five local Déné languages (Chipe-wyan, Dogrib, Loucheux, and North and South Slavey). In the Yukon, where the use of native languages is no longer strong, the CBC station in Whitehorse carries native-oriented programming in English during early evening, prime-time hours.

With these few exceptions, radio news directed at native audiences is currently limited. The main educational strength of radio as a medium is its immediacy and actuality. However, limited funding and once-a-week news broadcasts make it impossible for native broadcasters to present up-to-the-minute news on radio. Thus, native broadcasters are usually obliged to create magazine-format weekly shows which blend music, cultural affairs, interviews, and public affairs items. This news is generally "single-source," and lacks the depth of analysis to which listeners are normally entitled whenever news items are dated.

TRAIL AND COMMUNITY RADIO

There is another exception to the current, rather mediocre quality of native radio news and public affairs broadcasting. In small, remote communities in

Canada's North, native broadcasters have developed their own brand of grass-roots radio. To date, this very successful radio broadcasting has taken two forms: (a) trail radio; and (b) community radio.

The term "trail radio" refers to a two-way communications system which provides a lifeline to hunters and trappers in the bush, often in severe weather. For a relatively low cost or even at no cost to someone without funds, native people who are engaged in traditional economic pursuits can carry a lightweight, battery-operated, two-way radio transmitter-receiver in their gear. Trail radio contact with home bases keeps trappers and hunters abreast of family and community developments, and can also save lives. Without first-hand experience, it is difficult to appreciate how important and reassuring it can be for a family in Weagamow Lake, Ontario or in Rae Lakes, N.W.T. to know that relatives are safe in hunt camps and on traplines many miles away. It can be equally consoling for people who are out on the land to know that births have occurred without complications or that relatives who are sick or who have been injured in accidents have been successfully "medivacked" (medically evacuated to hospitals by airplane). Organizations such as the Wawatay Native Communications Society in Sioux Lookout, Ontario originally began with trail radio.

"Community radio" is a direct result of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's extended service policy where CBC radio programs are provided to all Canadian communities with a population of 500 or more residents. This policy is now more than a decade old. For the CBC to be able to install a small transmitter, a community is required only to guarantee an adequately-serviced building. The local community or radio society then supplies volunteers trained in the operation and day-to-day maintenance of the station, and it is up to the community to decide which CBC radio programs will be aired. By simply throwing a switch, local broadcasters can communicate directly with an entire community.

In terms of basic communications, community radio has had spectacular results and has become the pulse of many northern communities. Whether in Norway House, Manitoba, or Povungnituk, Québec, community radio has audience ratings and listener loyalties which would be the envy of public and private stations in any North American city. *Everybody* listens. As an example, imagine the following situation. It is a severe December afternoon in "P.O.V." (Povungnituk) in 1984. The wind blows off of the ice which covers Hudson Bay with a vengeance, and visibility is zero. It is even too cold for young "hot rodders" to "bomb around" on snowmobiles. What keeps this from being a completely depressing day is community radio. It is "phone-in" time on CKPV-FM, the local all-Inuktitut radio station, and the 800 residents of Povungnituk are incessantly phoning. They are playing a traditional game where one person phones in an animal imitation, and the first caller to identify the imitation wins. This game is followed by another where people wait to see who will be the first to call in and sing a chosen traditional song-in Inuktitut, of course. The callers are young and old, men and women. While playing such games, older people relax and children learn the subtleties of Inuktitut humor and culture. People are "having a ball," and every household in the community is full of laughter as the players forget the wind and cold. In the com-

munity's Co-Op Hotel (seven rooms and a community kitchen), an Inuktitut cleaning woman goes about her chores and chuckles aloud as her neighbors enjoy participating in community radio games. Her "ghetto blaster" (portable radio) is always on. It's the same all over P.O.V.

Community radio is much more than fun. Among other things, it links people in northern settlements in an extension of the same intimate, "face-to-face" manner as when they lived in family groups out on the land. Traditional patterns of communication are reinforced, native languages are preserved, and a genuine sense of community is encouraged. In many of Canada's remote northern settlements, one cannot be a functional member of the community without participation in this form of radio. Communication, transportation, and medical needs are all met through community radio. In Cross Lake, Manitoba, residents keep the sound on their television sets turned down low while watching the popular afternoon soap opera, "The Edge of Night." This allows them to keep an ear on the radio. To do otherwise would be too risky, because as everyone knows, the next message might be for you.

THE NORTHERN NATIVE BROADCAST ACCESS PROGRAM

With trail and community radio firmly entrenched in the northern Canadian lifestyle, radio (and to a lesser extent television) now seem ready for the next development in northern broadcasting. Dynamic innovations in northern communications are about to occur, and at the urging of native lobbyists, the federal government has taken a major initiative in northern broadcasting. This initiative is called the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program (NNBAP), and is supported by the Native Citizens Directorate of the Canadian Secretary of State. The Secretary of State is now committed to start-up funding of approximately forty million dollars for the expansion of northern broadcasting, a figure which eclipses the entire 1983-1984 fiscal budget for the federal Native Communications Program. According to an official government press release, the objective of this broadcasting program is "to provide an opportunity for native communications societies in the northern portions of seven provinces and in the two territories to produce regional radio and television programming which will protect and enhance native languages and cultures in the area" (Canada. Department of Communications 1983b).

Inspiration for the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program is often credited to an in-depth study commissioned by the Minister of Communications, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, and the Secretary of State. This extremely informative study was presented to the federal cabinet in February, 1983 and was declassified some eighteen months later. Its primary author, Charles Feaver, is a satellite communications expert with a special interest in the Canadian North (Canada. Department of Communications 1983a).

In defining the area which the NNBAP should serve, an imaginary line was drawn across Canada from west to east somewhat south of the 60th parallel. This line was devised in the late 1970s during research conducted under the direction

of Dr. Louis-Edmond Lemelin of Laval University. It crosses the middle of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, dips down to the lower quarters of Manitoba, and moves gradually upward across Ontario, Québec, and Labrador. The area above this line constitutes seventy percent of Canada's land mass and is defined as the "North." Current estimates for the native population of this area indicate approximately 210,000 Indian, Métis, and Inuit with a combined birthrate which is considerably higher than the Canadian national average. It is these people whom the NNBP is intended to serve.

Unfortunately, the NNBP can offer little direct assistance to the tens of thousands of native Canadians who have moved from their reserves and isolated northern communities to urban settings in the South. For this reason, native migrants to the city will probably be less well-informed in the future about native issues than their northern counterparts who have remained in relative "isolation." There are currently no native Canadian communications societies in any major city west of Winnipeg, Manitoba. In the Maritimes, particularly in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, nervous native political leaders have so far blocked the formation of federally-funded, "independent" native communications societies. This has resulted in obvious biases in the only available native news other than limited coverage provided by the mass media. At present, native newsletters and newspapers are published by political organizations which generally do not encourage critical coverage of their own affairs (see also the article in this volume by Stephen Riggins titled "The Organizational Structure of the *Toronto Native Times* [1968-1981]).

The formation of the NNBP was a direct response to the common concern of many native leaders that unrestricted invasion of northern airwaves by non-native radio and television will continue to have devastating effects on native cultures, traditions, and lifestyles. These native leaders fear that southern radio and television programming has the potential to eradicate an already threatened way of life. The origins of this concern are a matter of record. Beginning in the 1960s, the Canadian government, supported by the religious establishment, decreed that northern native people would abandon their lifestyles. Native people in the Canadian North were encouraged to settle permanently in communities where their children could attend school and where better medical services could also be provided. In the native villages which resulted from this policy of sedentarization, formal education followed exclusively European linguistic and social patterns. Since children were required to attend school, parents were no longer free to take them out on the land. However, settled families still required food, clothing, shelter, and other basic essentials which previously had been obtained from nature. The Canadian government then attempted to supply these essentials through a northern extension of the welfare system which has since robbed the recipients of their independence, self-sufficiency, and ultimately, their human dignity.

Having undergone the far-reaching economic and cultural changes associated with sedentarization, many native Canadians now have extensive time on their hands. As a result, they may watch more television than other Canadians. Except in the Eastern Arctic, where some Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and Taqramuit

Nipingat programs are shown, network television and radio do not contribute to the identity and cultural uniqueness of native people. Especially in the case of young people, television offers no explicit incentive to perpetuate traditional practices. Instead, young people see media role models shooting "craps," not caribou, driving three-wheel and other recreational vehicles instead of dog teams, and eating "Big Macs" instead of bannock.

REACTIONS TO NATIVE BROADCASTING IN THE NORTH

In Canada, southern radio and television programming has never been designed for the benefit of northern audiences. Neither was this programming initially brought to the North for the benefit of native people. Rather, mass media communications were introduced to the North in the mid-1960s for the purpose of reducing the isolation and turnover of non-native workers. Little or no consideration was given to the effect of these mass media communications on the indigenous people of the North. Through "permanent" staffing programs in the North, government agencies and private industries were trying to provide television and other amenities which would keep their employees relatively content in their northern assignments for as long as possible.

The initial impact of television on northern native people was negligible. Originally, provision of television coverage for the Canadian North was part of the rationale for federal Telestat Canada legislation in 1969. At that time, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Frontier Coverage Package" was a videotape delivery system linked to low-power transmitters and intended to serve major resource towns and administrative centers rather than communities with predominantly native populations. Two years after the launching of the Anik A-1 satellite in 1975, the CBC was delivering its signal by satellite to native communities as part of its Accelerated Coverage Service program for northern communities with populations of over 500 residents. However, since native audiences in the North received virtually the same non-native programs as southern audiences, this extended service had no effect on programming.

The first effective protest regarding this type of programming came from the Inuit of northern Québec, who quite logically wondered why programs reflecting their own lifestyle and culture were not part of this new television "service." Native leaders representing people in remote communities have always believed that overexposure to southern-style programming causes native people to lose their cultures. Examples of this attitude are shown by the following comments made between 1978 and 1982 during the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission's hearings on northern broadcasting:

We all know that children are very quick to learn from what they see. I know that when I was a child, I used to see my father hunting, and then I would do the same thing that he did when he was hunting, and make it into a game...I think if they had more programs on the Inuit, live on TV, then it would help the children to learn more of their way of life. If there were programs on TV,

like showing people how to sew or how to hunt, or to make more hunting equipment by hand, then it would be more informative to whoever was watching, especially the children (Henry Evaluardjuk, Frobisher Bay, N.W.T. 1978).

The developments of the last ten years have had a significant effect on our community and languages. These communication services have come to our region, but not as the result of a well-developed and co-ordinated plan which fits the needs of the people. It is, rather, that the systems bear the mark of the designers (Cathy Chisel, *Wawatay*, Thunder Bay, Ontario 1982).

The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation is licensed to distribute predominately Inuit cultural programming via the satellite channel of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Through the CBC satellite channel, Inuit broadcasters working for the IBC have been active in producing and distributing television programs, and they have also distributed many programs produced by the Taqramuit Nipingat. However, most northern native communications organizations which are associated with the NNBP concentrate on radio because it is so much cheaper to produce than television. Through radio, native organizations feel that they can give their audiences more value. In their initial funding proposals to the Canadian Secretary of State, most native communications organizations indicated that they fully intend to expand into television once radio broadcasting has been raised to reasonable standards. However, since there are many difficulties associated with network radio which is broadcast over long distances and in several languages, this may take longer than expected.

Native broadcasters in the Canadian North hope to establish effective radio and television programming which is produced by native people and is relevant to their needs. This complex goal is a major challenge because it involves training broadcasters in the required technical, artistic, journalistic, and administrative skills in an extremely short period of time. It is both unrealistic and unfair to expect native broadcasters to become competent professionals in a fraction of the time that their non-native counterparts spend in training. The average Canadian broadcaster spends nine years in elementary school, four or five years in high school, and at least three or four years in post-secondary training. Beyond this, there are several years of on-the-job experience which are required for the assumption of major professional responsibilities. Quite unfairly, native broadcasters are generally expected to assume full professional responsibilities regardless of their levels of schooling, and after only a short period of on-the-job training.

With this in mind, it is realistic to expect that the initial efforts of native broadcasters will be of a "beginner" caliber. Technical and professional difficulties are inevitable. Radio, television, and print journalism are extremely time-consuming professions which are full of deadlines and packed with many other tensions and pressures. Since television is by far the most time-consuming, costly, and technically-complex of these three media, it is also likely to be the most difficult to manage during the early stages of native broadcasting.

The initial stages of native broadcasting will inevitably face the extremely difficult task of attracting television audiences who are both accustomed and loyal to southern television produced by top professionals in an extremely competitive

field. It is well-known that even "serious" Canadian programming by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has difficulty attracting audiences. Younger native Canadians who have grown up under the influence of English-language education, rock 'n' roll and country and western music, and such popular television programs as soap operas, may be particularly difficult to win over to native television. Despite this challenge, native broadcasters will need to resist the temptation to attract young audiences by offering too much programming geared to mass audiences and the North American youth culture.

If native broadcasters simply emulate non-native broadcasting, then the NNBAP may be an expensive failure since its purpose is to advance and preserve native languages and cultures. If this were not its objective, then northern broadcasting could be left to the existing broadcast industry. Native broadcasters facing the many challenges of their profession will need to pursue their own serious objectives while realizing that people cannot be "force fed" educational material through the mass media. Whether native or otherwise, radio and television audiences make their own decisions about what they like. For this reason, effective native broadcasters will need to gauge audience preferences and make native broadcasting as appealing as non-native broadcasting. This balancing act must attract native audiences while providing enough serious, native cultural content to justify the expense and effort of native broadcasting. Community radio may provide the initial model.

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