

The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation

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Inuit Broadcasting Corporation

Cet article résume le développement de l'Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) depuis sa création en 1981. Cette société diffuse cinq heures et demie de programme télévisé par semaine dans la langue Inuktitut pour une population de 20,000 Inuit établis dans les communautés éloignées du Labrador, des Territoires du nord-ouest et du Québec septentrional. L'auteur examine les tentatives qui ont précédées la création de cette société, les problèmes de financement, de diffusion et de formation des employés et évalue les résultats d'un sondage récent auprès de ses auditeurs.

This paper provides an overview of the development of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) since its founding in 1981. At present, the IBC provides five and one half hours of television programming each week in the Inuktitut language to over 20,000 Inuit living in remote communities in Labrador, the Northwest Territories, and northern Québec. After surveying media efforts which preceded the network's founding, this paper discusses the IBC's difficulties with funding and distribution. It also reports on a recent audience survey.

INTRODUCTION

We might liken the onslaught of southern television and the absence of native television to the neutron bomb. This is the bomb that kills the people but leaves the buildings standing. Neutron bomb television is the kind of television that destroys the soul of a people but leaves the shell of a people walking around. This is television in which the traditions, the skills, the culture, the language, count for nothing. The pressure, especially on our children, to join the invading culture and language and leave behind a language and culture that count for nothing is explosively powerful (Rosemarie Kuptana, President of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, during her statement to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission Public Hearing on Pay-TV Tiering and Universal Service, Hull, Québec December 1, 1982).

When Rosemarie Kuptana made the above statement to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in 1982, she was echoing long-standing fears which the Inuit have expressed for many years. The impact of southern television on the North has been a matter of concern to the Inuit since the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) first introduced its Accelerated Coverage Plan in July, 1975. At that time, the CBC's Accelerated Coverage Plan began providing CBC television programming for all communities in Canada with a population of over 500. Although the Accelerated Coverage Plan provided funds for hardware, it did not allocate funds for programming, and Inuit leaders and residents of the Canadian North soon became afraid that the unrestricted importation of programs depicting southern attitudes, values, and behavior would lead to a loss of Inuit language and culture, and to the disruption of community life.

As a result, the hamlet of Igloolik, located to the west of Baffin Island, adopted a simple protective measure: for years the community voted to prevent the reception of all television. Despite such efforts, it was clear that television could not be kept out of the North. The question then became how this new medium could best be used by the Inuit to protect their language and culture.

This important question was soon addressed by the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), the national organization which represents the 25,000 Inuit of the Northwest Territories (N.W.T.), northern Québec, and Labrador. In 1975, the ITC launched a communications program to ensure that the Inuit would maintain a measure of control over the nature and quantity of television being broadcast in the North. Working through the existing legislative and regulatory structures, the ITC conducted research, intervened before the CRTC, lobbied the federal government, and established several pilot communications projects. These communications projects ranged from extending the intercommunity, high-frequency radio system in Keewatin to improving postal service in the N.W.T.

THE INUKSHUK PROJECT

In May, 1975, the Canadian federal Department of Communications offered the ITC access to the Anik B satellite as part of a one-year experiment in satellite communications. The ITC's Anik B project was christened "Inukshuk," after the anthropomorphic stone cairns which traditional Inuit built on the land as beacons for travellers. Project goals were ambitious, and the Inukshuk Project was no less than an attempt to establish the first northern television network. At that time, the CBC's only television facility in the Northwest Territories was a studio in Yellowknife. It was planned that the Inukshuk Project would transmit live programs from Frobisher Bay, with interactive audio from five other production centers in Cambridge Bay, Baker Lake, Eskimo Point, Igloolik, and Pond Inlet (Inuit Tapirisat of Canada 1979a).

The initial phase of this project lasted two years. While project co-ordinators installed technical facilities in local production centers, Inuit trainees in Pond Inlet, Baker Lake, Frobisher Bay, Cambridge Bay, Igloolik, and Eskimo Point studied the fundamentals of film and video production. At the same time, members of the Inukshuk crew installed playback equipment in communities which had barely begun to receive television.

Within months, Inuit trainees were producing videotapes in their own language which documented their culture, their communities, and their own view of the North. These videotapes were circulated among the Arctic communities participating in the project and were locally screened. Although the logistics of northern transportation made the distribution and scheduling of these programs extremely difficult, community reaction to the work of the young Inuit videomakers was overwhelmingly positive.

On September 29, 1980, the Inukshuk project began broadcasting via the Anik B satellite and the Frobisher Bay uplink. Audio and video signals were transmitted from Frobisher Bay to the five community production units in Cambridge Bay, Baker Lake, Eskimo Point, Igloolik, and Pond Inlet. Audio signals from

these communities were also fed back to Frobisher Bay and then rebroadcast via the uplink. This interactive capacity led to some of the Inukshuk project's most innovative and important programing. For example, interactive programs to discuss game management were held among hunters and trappers' associations, and officials of the Government of the Northwest Territories met with local education committees via the Inukshuk system. Inukshuk was also used to link six N.W.T. communities with four communities in northern Québec in order to discuss aboriginal rights during the process of reforming the Canadian constitution. Throughout its eighteen months of satellite access, the Inukshuk system was frequently used as a pan-northern town hall or forum where special interest groups such as hunters, firefighters, and trappers, among others, were able to talk to people with similar concerns in other communities. Inukshuk programing also included community profiles, cultural documentaries, news, music, public service programs, and instruction in traditional crafts and skills. Programs were broadcast completely in Inuktitut, and were completely Inuit in content and perspective.

The Inukshuk project proved that technical and production difficulties surrounding the operation of a television network in the North could be overcome. More importantly, the Inukshuk project demonstrated that television could help preserve Inuit language and culture. Appiah Awa, a viewer from Pond Inlet, expressed it this way:

We try to teach our kids our own culture, but we only put a minimal amount of time into it...say a day every two weeks. Whereas, if we had more Inuktitut programing, since they watch TV. all the time, they'd learn without even thinking about it, as they do in the white world (Inuit Tapirisat of Canada 1979b).

FORMATION OF THE INUIT BROADCASTING CORPORATION

In December, 1980, the Inuit Tapirisat submitted an application to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission proposing the creation of a permanent Inuit broadcasting system (Inuit Tapirisat of Canada 1980). This application was supported by several Canadian and international organizations, including the CBC, the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, the Canadian Association for Adult Education, ATAI: Arctic Creative Development Foundation (the word "atai" is an Inuktitut expression meaning approximately "let's get moving"), the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, UNESCO, and others. By July, 1980, the CRTC had already received a statement from its own Therrien Committee on the Extension of Services to Northern and Remote Communities recommending that "consideration be given to provide financial and other support, on the largest feasible scale, to the creation of an Inuit broadcasting system to operate a network of services available in all Inuit communities" (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission 1980).

In April, 1981, the CRTC granted a network television license to the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Two months later, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation was formed as a new organization which was to be completely independent of the In-

uit Tapirisat. The federal government then granted two-year interim funding to the IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation 1981). As a short-term solution to the problem of distribution, the CBC subsequently offered the IBC access to its late-night timeslots on the Northern Service. At midnight on January 11, 1982, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation made northern broadcasting history by airing its first program, a ninety-minute special introducing the new network (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation 1982c). This opening program introduced the staff at IBC production centers and then focused on comments from Inuit throughout the Arctic about the concept of an Inuit broadcasting system.

Within weeks of its inaugural program, the IBC took its first step toward the network broadcasting of current affairs. At the time, the Northwest Territories was preparing to vote on the creation of a new territory in the Eastern Arctic which was tentatively called "Nunavut." Many people had expressed concern that issues surrounding the possible division of the Northwest Territories were not clearly understood. IBC staff members from every location contributed material to a series of documentaries explaining the plebiscite. Just days before the vote, the IBC broadcast a debate between Inuit leaders and other N.W.T. political figures. The IBC also covered the plebiscite returns live from Frobisher Bay. Dennis Patterson, Minister of Education for the N.W.T., credited the IBC for a high voter turnout in the eastern Arctic (Patterson 1982). This series of IBC documentaries proved to both viewers and members of the IBC staff that the IBC network has an important role to play in providing information which the Inuit need in order to make decisions about their lives and the lives of their children.

Although the sophistication and technical quality of IBC programming continued to improve after its first on-air season, the IBC was faced with two limitations which have always plagued Native broadcasters in Canada: funding and distribution. When the federal government announced interim funding for the IBC, it praised IBC work and expressed a wish to see this successful work continue. However, it did not grant an increase in funding which would have enabled the IBC to develop its long-term goals. Realistically speaking, facilities and equipment which had been suitable for a one-year experiment were woefully inadequate for a permanent broadcasting operation.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT VERSUS ADEQUATE FUNDING AND CBC CONTROL

At the beginning of the Inukshuk project, the hamlet of Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island in the District of Franklin, N.W.T. donated a one-room plywood building to be used as a production center. For more than a year, two producers scripted, shot, and edited their programs in this modest production center before the building was closed as a fire hazard. In the community of Frobisher Bay on Baffin Island, N.W.T., training, production, and network management were all carried out in vacant classrooms borrowed from the local Adult Education Society. In Baker Lake in the District of Keewatin, N.W.T., the Inukshuk studio was built

by volunteers. The co-operation and generosity extended to the IBC in these production centers illustrated the importance of IBC programming to northern residents. However, the IBC network was being forced to rely on the goodwill of communities rather than on the security of adequate funding.

The IBC soon discovered the limitations of distributing its programs through the CBC. In reality, the CBC's "Northern Service" programming is a potpourri of American situation comedies, CBC network programming, regional news from Newfoundland, and in a few timeslots, Inuktitut and English videotapes produced by the CBC in Yellowknife and Ottawa. Throughout the CBC network, CBC programming takes precedence over any other scheduled programs. Although both the Northern Service and the CBC network have remained supportive, IBC programming is still a very low priority. In the delivery system of the CBC, network political announcements, golf tournaments, or baseball games can result in the cancellation of IBC broadcasts, often on very little notice. Because peak viewing hours have been traditionally reserved for CBC network programming, IBC programs are usually aired after 11:00 pm. As IBC President Rosemarie Kuptana told the CRTC Public Hearing on Pay-TV Tiering and Universal Service in Hull, Québec on December 1, 1982: "Nature made our land the 'Land of the Midnight Sun'; it took the CBC to make us the 'Land of Midnight Television'" (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission 1982).

In 1982, the federal government called for submissions on northern and native communications. The IBC responded with a document titled "Position on Northern Broadcasting" which asked the government to recognize native and northern communications as a permanent and essential element of the Canadian broadcasting system. This document also described the IBC's immediate and long term goals, and presented options for the more efficient production, distribution, and regulation of northern broadcasting (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation 1982b).

THE NORTHERN NATIVE BROADCAST ACCESS PROGRAM (NNBAP)

In August, 1982, IBC concerns about the distribution of northern broadcasting were underlined in a press release quoting IBC President Josepi Padlayat (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation 1982a). Since public funds were used to develop the Canadian telecommunications industry, Canadians had been promised a rich harvest of social benefits, especially in the North where the transmission of electronic signals by satellite is the only efficient means of communication. Just days after the submission of the IBC position paper, "Position on Northern Broadcasting," Padlayat refused to attend the launching of the Anik D satellite at Cape Canaveral, Florida, and had suggested that instead of the mass importation of programs from southern Canada, a single transponder on the Anik D satellite which could be shared by the IBC and the CBC Northern Service would far better serve the needs of the Inuit. Both the IBC and other native journalists continued to lobby the federal government for a definitive policy statement on native broadcasting. On March 10, 1983, the federal government responded with the Northern Native

Broadcast Access Program (NNBAP), a four-year, 40.3 million dollar program administered by the Native Citizens Program of the Secretary of State. The NNBAP Program was governed by five principles:

1. Northern residents should be offered access to an increasing range of programing choices through the exploration of technological opportunities.
2. Northern native people should have the opportunity of active participation in the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission's determination of the character, quantity, and priority of programing to be broadcast in predominantly native communities.
3. In order to maintain and develop their cultures and languages, northern native people should have fair access to broadcasting distribution systems in the North.
4. Wherever native people form a significant proportion of the population of a service area, programing which is both relevant to native concerns and includes content originated by native people should be produced for distribution by northern broadcasting services.
5. Government agencies engaged in establishing broadcasting policies which affect native culture should consult regularly with northern native representatives.

During the announcement of the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program, the IBC was singled out for special praise. John Munro, who was then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, said, "The Inuit have already demonstrated how broadcasting can be used to foster native languages and cultures. They produce programing reflective of Inuit values...as popular with its audiences as anything imported from the south" (Canada. Department of Communications 1983). But once again, despite strong praise, increased funding granted to the IBC was only enough to cover existing operations. There were no provisions for new studio space, staff increases, the upgrading of production equipment, or training. Following the announcement of the formation of the NNBAP, IBC President Josepi Padlayat said, "I am proud that IBC is being touted as a model native broadcaster, but I am also disappointed that we will not be allowed to grow as we had hoped" (Brisebois 1983:5).

Despite Padlayat's disappointment, the IBC's new season began three weeks after the announcement of the NNBAP, and was marked by growth in two areas. The first area of growth was an increase in the amount of on-air time to a potential of six hours of programing per week in a nightly timeslot beginning at 10:05 p.m. The second area of growth was a large-scale training program to upgrade the skills of the IBC's existing employees and to teach thirteen new trainees the fundamentals of television production.

TRAINING PROGRAMS OF THE INUIT BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Following the Inukshuk project, the IBC has routinely conducted its own in-house training. Since there are no standardized television training programs in northern Canada, and no unemployed producers to draw upon, the IBC has

designed a comprehensive curriculum for in-house training which is taught completely in the North and has since become the model for many native communications groups. This curriculum combines technical instruction, basic journalism, and language and cultural workshops with practical, hands-on experience in production (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation 1984). Funded by the Industrial Training Branch of Canada Employment and Immigration, the retention rate of the IBC training program is high. After two years, sixty percent of in-house trained personnel still work full-time for the IBC, while a further twenty percent of these personnel are contract and part-time employees.

THE THIRD INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR CONFERENCE

During its second season, the IBC continued to expand its coverage of news and current affairs. IBC crews travelled to Ottawa to cover the First Ministers' Conference on Aboriginal Rights and also visited communities across the Arctic from Inuvik to Sanikiluaq during the production of a documentary on the Nunavut Constitutional Forum tour. However, the IBC's greatest challenge came in July, 1983, when it was invited to act as host communicator for the third Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) in Frobisher Bay.

The ICC is an international organization composed of Inuit from Canada, Alaska, and Greenland which has been granted the status of a non-government organization by the United Nations (Inuit Circumpolar Conference 1983). During the 1983 Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the host communicator co-ordinated all media coverage of the event and provided over a hundred visiting journalists with everything from pencils to video editing and uplink facilities. In addition to accommodating members of the press from Canada, Alaska, and Greenland during the third Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the IBC met its commitment to its own audience. Thus, for six weeks before the conference, the IBC produced programs explaining the history, structure, and mandate of the ICC, interviewed Canadian representatives, and discussed the issues facing delegates.

During the week-long, third Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the IBC produced an extraordinary sixty-seven hours of coverage. Fifty of these hours were broadcast live to Frobisher Bay, while seventeen consisted of commentary, analysis, and interviews broadcast to the network. With the help of both the Taqramiut Nipingat of Salluit, Québec and the CBC, the IBC provided the third Inuit Circumpolar Conference with wider exposure than any previous ICC had received. As the third Inuit Circumpolar Conference concluded without a hitch, the IBC's exhausted crews received considerable attention and praise for their work.

THE INUIT BROADCASTING CORPORATION AUDIENCE SURVEY

Since its establishment, the IBC has consistently produced quality documentaries, entertainment, and current affairs programs. This was substantiated through an audience survey by an independent research team from Concordia University

which took place from January to March, 1983 (Valaskakis and Wilson 1984; see also the article titled "Goûts et préférences actuels des téléspectateurs inuits en Terre de Baffin au Keewatin dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest" by Valaskakis and Wilson in this issue). This survey was funded by the Canadian Secretary of State under an agreement that the IBC would also contribute funding. The survey was designed to measure the extent to which IBC programs were reaching their intended Inuit audience, to describe the nature and size of this audience, and to document Inuit program preferences. Ten of the twenty-five Inuit communities receiving IBC programming were successfully surveyed. The selection of these ten communities reflected a balance of geographical spread, demographic differences, prior audience research, and potential for follow-up research. During the survey, teams of Inuit fieldworkers, or non-Inuit researchers accompanied by interpreters, conducted door-to-door interviews.

The results of this survey confirmed the extent of audience support for IBC programming. In the ten communities surveyed, eighty-five percent of Inuit residents of all ages watched a minimum of one to three hours of the IBC's five hours of programming each week. The most popular viewing hours corresponded to the IBC timeslot of 10:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight. The television viewing patterns which were documented among members of this northern audience also suggested that the IBC was attracting new viewers. Respondents to the survey stated that they enjoyed programs which involved action, traditional pursuits, and Inuit personalities. Young viewers expressed a strong interest in programs about traditional skills. Over two-thirds of all respondents said that they would like to see more IBC programming during prime-time viewing hours.

The IBC audience survey also asked respondents to specify exactly what type of programming should be emphasized and increased. Answers to this question included suggestions for programs about Inuit knowledge of the environment, practical information, Inuit music and language, home management, health, news, and children's programs. Clearly, the results of this survey documented a strong mandate for the IBC from its audience.

During the annual meeting of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in December, 1983, members agreed that the IBC should consolidate its current efforts until such time as funds are available for expansion. Given its present resources, the IBC is unable to open any new production centers. For the time being, the IBC will continue to provide quality Inuktitut programming and to lobby for the advanced communications system which the Inuit deserve.

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