

FIRST PEOPLES AND COMMUNICATIONS: AN EXERCISE IN HOPE AND FRUSTRATION

BY VALERIE ALIA

Canada is the world leader in Aboriginal communications, yet setbacks and cutbacks have followed every increment of progress. In broadcasting, there are about 30 First Nations radio stations in Canada, 20 in the United States, a few in Latin America and northern Scandinavia, Maori broadcasts on Radio New Zealand and a Maori radio network, and an Aboriginal station in Australia at Alice Springs. Many Canadian programs are small-scale and *ad hoc*. Others are ambitious and far-reaching—most notably, Television Northern Canada (TVNC), the pan-Arctic, satellite-transmitted television programming run by a consortium of Aboriginal broadcasters representing every northern region. With less consistent funding and the resultant scarcity of personnel, northern print media have a more checkered history.

A great many Aboriginal leaders have had journalism training, which has served them well, providing not only communicative skills, but also access to news, information, and crucial networks of policy and power. Knowing this, one might think that journalism education would be expanding, but that is not the case. A 1995 article in *Editor & Publisher*, the newspaper trade magazine, is headlined "Journalism schools get F in diversity". A survey of North American journalism programs showed little progress in recruiting minority students or faculty and the record for recruitment of students is not

much better.

In the early 1970s, Grant MacEwen College in Edmonton started the first academic program in Canada for native journalists, the Native Communications Program. In London, Ontario, the Program in Journalism for Native People (PJNP) opened its doors in 1980—only to shut them abruptly (ironically, after continuing success) a decade later. In 1983, the Department of Indian Communications Arts (INCA) was founded at Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) in Regina. In 1992, the Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Education Society founded its own journalism school in Hazelton, British Columbia.

There is an underlying double standard which assumes that, although no self-respecting "mainstream" journalist would consider such an option, Aboriginal journalists should be willing to work for free to keep their publications alive.

After several difficult formative years, Native News Network of Canada (NNNC) continues, slowly and without core funding, to develop a First Peoples' wire service. Founded in 1990 by a group of

journalists, including its first President, Bud White Eye, and current President, Dan Smoke, it is incorporated and affiliated with the Native Journalists' Association and has made brief inroads into marketing print and radio stories.

In 1990, scarcely a year after the founding and funding of TVNC, the Alberta government cancelled the Native Communication Programme, cutting \$3 million to the 13 Aboriginal newspapers NCP had funded. The effect was devastating, the cause confusing. Part of the problem was the lack of communication among government departments. But the cuts occurred in another context, in which government has increasingly encouraged the privatization of news media. The implication is that media institutions are meant to be profit-making, or at least self-sustaining. The reality is that no one would suggest that the *Toronto Star* should switch to volunteer labour if it cannot afford to continue publishing. There is an underlying double standard which assumes that, although no self-respecting "mainstream" journalist would consider such an option, Aboriginal journalists should be willing to work for free to keep their publications alive.

Bud White Eye and I outlined the issues as we see them in a brief submitted to the RCAP on October 21, 1992, reproduced below.

COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM

A brief to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples by the Native News Network of Canada, Bud White Eye, President, and Dr. Valerie Alia, Member, Advisory Board

Communication is the core of the First Nations' concerns. In a democratic society, news media ensure that information is

communicated to the public. Many of the myths and misperceptions which persist

At the same time that Television Northern Canada (TVNC) received funding and captured the northern airwaves, Aboriginal Communication Societies and journalism training programs experienced distressing, sometimes devastating, funding cutbacks. The result has been the demise of programs for training Aboriginal journalists—including opportunities for early years, or first-year experience after graduating (apprenticeship year), the curtailment of news services by and for First Nations, the cutting of jobs for qualified First Nations journalists, and the extension of already overburdened facilities and personnel, sometimes to the breaking point.

among non-Aboriginal people are perpetuated by non-communication, poor communication, or one-sided communication.

Current efforts to remedy

inaccuracies in "mainstream" news coverage of Aboriginal issues are an important beginning. But they are not enough. Non-Aboriginal journalists are slowly becoming better educated about the issues and peoples they report. "Mainstream" news media are broadcasting and publishing reports and columns by (usually part-time or freelance) Aboriginal journalists.

Aboriginal people remain under-represented in these media, both in actual coverage and in employment. Where they are hired, they are often subject to the last-hired, first-fired syndrome, leaving employment statistics at the status quo. The Aboriginal-run news media are unfunded or under-funded, and must often rely on volunteer labour to continue. The crucial and highly successful Aboriginal Communication Societies which government helped to establish are threatened with extinction.

Non-Aboriginal news media are not hiring many First Nations journalists, and even if they were, this would solve only a small part of the problem. First Nations journalists must be employable and employed and they must have the option of this employability in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal news media.

The depth and diversity of Aboriginal perspectives must be communicated through both First Nations and "mainstream" news media, and to as broad a public as possible.

The past several years have seen a number of developments in Aboriginal communications—some of them sharply contradictory. At the same time that Television Northern Canada (TVNC) received funding and captured the northern airwaves, Aboriginal Communication Societies and journalism training

programs experienced distressing, sometimes devastating, funding cutbacks. The result has been the demise of programs for training Aboriginal journalists—including opportunities for early years, or first-year experience after graduating (apprenticeship year), the curtailment of news services by and for First Nations, the cutting of jobs for qualified First Nations journalists, and the extension of already overburdened facilities and personnel, sometimes to the breaking point.

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Communications training programs have produced leaders—in politics, business and social services, as well as journalism. Graduates of these programs have gone on to lead national organizations and found newspapers and radio stations. There is a need for increased training. Yet, the training programs are disappearing.

Among the casualties of cutbacks were the University of Western Ontario's Program in Journalism for Native People (PJNP) and the program sponsored by Arctic College

in the Northwest Territories. These programs bypassed obstacle-creating credentials to open doors for prospective journalists—and the result was excellence on many fronts.

First Nations newspapers, magazines, radio, and television provide an effective training ground for journalists, as well as an opportunity to sell their work. If we are to increase the participation of First Nations journalists in the communication of the communities' priorities and perspectives, we must continue to foster these crucial training programs. This means promoting programs which facilitate entrance of Aboriginal students into university, as well as those which exist outside the college or university system.

In a depressed economy, equal-opportunity legislation and private company programs are of little use to Aboriginal journalists who have not earned conventional credentials—regardless of the extent of their skills or expertise.

It is more urgent than ever that Aboriginal perspectives reach a wider public. We, therefore, offer the following recommendations, for consideration by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE NATIVE NEWS NETWORK OF CANADA (NNNC)

1. That there be immediate and substantial efforts to revitalize the Aboriginal Communication Societies, and fund transition programs aimed at facilitating their financial independence.

2. That a program be established, of incentives to journalism schools to encourage and educate Aboriginal journalists, to include transition programs, scholarship funds, and adjustments to entrance requirements as needed.


3. That a counselling pro-

gram be established, earmarked for the development of programs and projects in Aboriginal communications.

4. That a funding program be established, as a bridge between First Nations students, teachers, administrators, and news media.

5. That the central importance of effective communications be acknowledged in according recognition to the sovereign rights of the First Nations peoples in Canada.

6. That programs be created and supported with long-term funding, for the purpose of promoting understanding and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal journalists.

Although some comfort can be taken from the decision to include much of our recommendations in the RCAP Report, celebration would be premature. The gist of our own analysis is included in volume 3, *Perspectives and Realities*, but the possibility of a connection between journalism and the false assumptions the Report ascribes to "the non-Aboriginal world view" is never spelled out. Nor is there any connection made between First Nations journalistic coverage of local and world events and the prospects for self-government. Lastly, there does not appear to be much discussion on the need to influence provincially funded institutions or to develop federal funding to enable the teaching of First Nations journalism within self-governing First Nations institutions. 

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