

NATIVE PRESS: Imminent Demise?

The latest edition of Time Magazine blares out a headline on the cover: "How to Save Your Newspaper." The magazine itself appears to need the same advice, for without the advertising in these troubled times, it is as thin as a country-church bulletin. A recent edition of the Atlantic magazine offers a lead article on how the New York Times might save itself from bankruptcy.

As I watch the printed press in America and around the world succumb to economics and loss of readership to the Internet, I wonder what will happen to the American Indian press. My god, I think to myself, if even the New York Times is on the ropes how are we in the Indian press going to survive?

Back to the days in the early 1970s when we were just getting started in the American Indian press Association, we never dreamed of the great number of first class periodicals that Indian Country has now. But we never dreamed that we'd see the demise of the press either. As we struggled along in our Washington news bureau with the most primitive equipment imaginable (remember mimeograph?) Richard LaCourse and I would talk about the great future of the Indian press. Our dreams were grandiose; inspired by the likes of Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* and *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. The most renowned communication theorist of his time, McLuhan foresaw technology beyond the printed word, but probably never dreamed of the demise of the printed press that would be brought on by the Internet.

Canadian progressiveness seemed to reflect the forward thinking of McLuhan, who was one of its most celebrated citizens. And LaCourse and I looked to Canada as a model for the Indian press in the United States, for the Native media up there were way ahead of us. We traveled to Edmonton to visit the Alberta Native Communications Society, which was a multi media service for the Indian tribes and communities in the province. They were funded largely by the national and provincial governments, and were well-equipped and well-staffed by Native journalists and technicians. We envied them, but realized that we could not expect such support from the U.S. Government. We figured that it was just as well.

The Native media in Canada was well into broadcast, and we admired the work of radio journalist and producer, Johnny Yesno of the Cree Nation. And the National Film Board of Canada was doing excellent production on Native life, not only documentary but award-winning drama on contemporary issues as well.

Dick LaCourse, a member of the Yakama Nation, was the first person we hired onto the AIPA staff. We brought him aboard from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer to head up our new Washington news bureau, which was officed in a small room that the National Congress of American Indians let us use in their Dupont Circle headquarters. From there, with the help of volunteers and student interns, LaCourse would crank out a weekly package of stories for the tribal newspapers that were AIPA members. These packages were sent by regular mail, since there was no fax, much less the Internet. In those days, Indian Country news had a long shelf life, and we'd see AIPA news stories printed long after our release dates.

AIPA brought new life to Indian affairs in Washington. Would-be whistle blowers in federal

offices, including the White House, were eager to give LaCourse information leaks about policy and silly foibles of the bureaucracy, and these stories and anecdotes spiced up the tribal papers.

The Indian press had developed over the last half of the 20th Century. Even back in the 1970s, there were long-established news publications serving tribes and urban-Indian communities; and these ranged from monthly mimeographed newsletters to a few professional weekly or biweekly newspapers, such as the Navajo Times, the Tundra Times, and Akwesasne Notes. With AIPA's news service, Indian media no longer had to wait to get native news from stories in the mainstream media. Now they had their own source of fresh materials that often scooped the mainstream press.

Those were revolutionary times, and new publications were popping up all over Indian Country. Many of them were ideological organs of political movements, and usually were produced by younger journalists and students. These youthful journalists brought new ideas and new approaches, such as *Dine' ba hane'*, a standard sized newspaper from Navajo country. Co-edited by Vincent Craig, now a noted Navajo humorist and performer, *Dine' ba hane'* had a satiric bent and much humor. For example, it featured a full page comic spread called "Super Navajo," and later another called "Mutton Man," comic heroes punching away at tribal politicians and federal bureaucrats alike.

AIPA set out an ambitious agenda of helping to improve the editorial and technical quality of Indian newspapers, and to provide news service to them. None of this we could translate to meet the requirements of IRS for a tax-exempt status for the AIPA, and our inability to raise funds eventually doomed the organization.

But in our wildest dreams, we never imagined the time when so many quality publications would come out of Indian Country as there are now, including slick magazines and weekly papers. Today's tribal and private newspapers show much professionalism and sophistication that has come from more and better educated Indian journalists, more and cheaper technology, computer graphics, and more financial resources, much of it from casino revenues. They have also discovered the commerce that depends on Indian Country, and the advertising revenues that those businesses would bring.

And there is strong confidence on the part of publishers and editors, shown by their willingness to take on controversial tribal issues, and their success in forcing inclusion of freedom of the press provisions in tribal constitutions.

The Indian press is at its peak, it seems. But what does the future hold for us? Much, I suppose, will depend on how our tribes and communities fare in these troubled times, including tribal schools and programs that provide much advertising revenues, as well as local and tribal businesses. Much will depend on how tribal casinos fare, since the earnings from those enterprises provide significant funds for several tribal news media.

Most certainly, the Internet will eat away at the readership of the Native printed media, less so the broadcast media, perhaps. It is true that the Indian presence on the Internet is blossoming in web sites and blogs. For example, Indiancountry.com take you to the latest of Indian Country

Today newspaper. On a week-day basis, Indianz.com is available on line with the latest news and editorial commentary. True, Indianz.com and other Internet sources depend on the printed media for much of their content, but increasingly journalists are offering original materials for airing by them.

In many ways, Indian Country is much slower paced than the outer world. And as I mentioned earlier, shelf life of news out there is long. In much of the Native boomer generation, computers have not yet taken over the lives of so many people as it has elsewhere. So, perhaps, the threat of Internet is not as great to the Indian press as it is to the mainstream media.

Nevertheless, the fate of the Indian press is something that needs to be talked about and written about. The Native American Journalists Association should take up the issue at its convention in Albuquerque in early August 2009.

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