

Lack of Ethics in the Indian Press...

As I watch a strange new development in the American Indian American press unfolding I am reminded of a story in Lakota mythology I had heard many years ago. This is about a creature called Iya, a giant that gobbles up everything in its way to satisfy its insatiable hunger for power. This modern day Iya I'm talking about is the much heralded re-entry of Tim Giago into the world of publishing with his new weekly Native Sun News.

Tim flouts the risk of getting back into the newspaper business in these perilous economic times that have seen the bankruptcy of much larger and long-standing newspapers. In fact, he plays on that great risk to magnify the humanitarian purposes he says he means to serve. In announcing the venture several weeks ago, he wrote that he is risking his all for the tribal people who are direly need a "watchdog" to keep in check their tribal governments. For tribal government, he says, "have for many years run roughshod over their people." His new newspaper would be that watchdog.

In an interview on National Public Radio, which aired on April 1st, he claimed that his new paper was only to reach out to serve poor people who don't have Internet communication and must rely on the printed word. According to him, these people, mostly on the reservations, are not being served by the Indian press.

Several years ago, Giago had convinced a Lakota entrepreneur to finance a newspaper, the Lakota Country Times, and served as advisor to help set it up. It appeared that he meant to have the paper as his own publication, with another interested party paying for it. This would help him circumvent the no-compete clause he agreed to when he sold his Indian Country Today newspaper to the Oneida Tribe of New York.

However, when he was offered the Lakota Country Times for purchase four years ago, he declined, saying that it carried too much debt, which is another way of saying that if he bought it he would be carrying too much debt.

Recently the Lakota Country Times was purchased by a young Lakota couple with a loan they secured from the Lakota Fund. But now they are faced with a heavy-handed rival in the Native Sun News, and they are rightfully concerned about their survival.

In an email he taunted them: "Subscribers (sic) are pouring in since we announced our new paper. They all say, 'Thank god your back (sic). There isn't another Indian paper worth the paper it is printed on.' I hate to tell you that." In another, he tells them, "You guys want war with me you will get it." Then he assures them that "We will meet you and beat you on a level playing field."

From my business experience, I understand that this is pure and simply business. And I know that the business world is often ruthless, especially in these economic times when survival means dog-eat-dog competition. That should be understood and expected by any person who gets into any business, including the young Native couple who purchased the Lakota Country Times.

But the press is not just about business, and there is something unfair here. First of all, it is not a level playing field, as Giago states. For his name-recognition, gained over many years of self-promotion, and the altruistic motives that he claims, get him access to the major media like National Public Radio. His story as told to the NPR interviewer is that of a Lakota elder (himself), undaunted by the challenge of the deep recession and economic pitfalls, preparing to give his people what is noble and just.

But his actions show another side of Giago than the brave and noble tribal elder. His sanctimonious pronouncements don't hold up in the dirty tactics he employs against this small local Indian-owned journal, and possibly others in his initial market area.

That is what rubs me as wrong. He movingly tells the NPR host of his earnest desire to give to the poor computerless masses of Indian people something "they can hold in their hands and read as they enjoy a cup of coffee." But this loses something when he works to destroy the Lakota Country Times, which local readers on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations are already holding in their hands and reading.

Beyond that, he uses his new journal to spread inaccuracies or outright lies about the Lakota Country Times, telling in the latest issue of the Native Sun News that the Times is up for sale and has been offered to three separate prospective, including himself, but could find no buyers. This story appears to be meant to hurt the reputation of the Times' in the eyes of their readers and advertisers. After all, who would want to subscribe to a newspaper, or advertise in one that is on the ropes and ready to go under?

This is at best unethical, and at worst possibly libelous, in my opinion.

I will always remember in 1971 when board members of the brand-new American Indian Press Association were putting together the final documents of the organization. We were meeting in the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Fixed to a pillar in the great hall there was a brass plaque quoting Joseph Pulitzer, for whom the greatest prize in journalism is named, and it read as follows:

"An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. Our Republic and its press will rise and fall together."

The Board members all copied down that quote on paper and in our hearts. It is something that should be restored in the collective soul of the Native American Press today, especially that of Tim Giago.

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