

The Future of Native Radio
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Yesterday I listened to National Public Radio's symposium discussion on the Information Highway. Where is this road going? Where is the on ramp? What is the toll charge? Who are the gate keepers? These are some of the questions that came to mind as I heard panel members addressing the issues.

While serving on the National Federation of Community Broadcasters, Board of Directors, I took part in table discussions concerning the role of community radio. It seemed that as Vice President, Al Gore drafted the outline for the great highway, he and his techno-buddies did not think about public radio's involvement. When the staff of NCFB and others queried them on this, they said it was an oversight. I disagree. I think that the thought never occurred to them that radio broadcasting could in any way be of service to the land line, fiber optic driven info-highway.

This leads into my next question, will the Information Highway be open to Native broadcasters? If so, what role do we play? I have been talking this over with a few people over the years. At first our talks had nothing to do with Info-highways. We discussed possible activities a real Native Media Network could take on. These talks started in the early development of ICA. What can Native communities expect of a Native media network? What impacts can be made by a real Native Media network? If Native communities hold the missing voice in national media, what message do we add to the mainstreams? Do we use national access to run our versions of current national programs? Do we create a new paradigm in broadcast technique and content? Do we address all the above the best we can, and if so where do we start?

The Shaping of Things to Come.

In late '91 the talk about Native Media centered on adding the missing voice to the mainstream discussion. We realized that radio was meant for Native people. We have a message to share, we have opinions on every bit of news and happening. Our main problem was the American society's inability to understand that there are other ways of thinking and viewing the world. This has always been the basic difference between Native and non-Native cultures. National news content was no different. How could it be any different? Who runs the national shows? Non-Natives. Who has easier access to national media systems? Non-Natives. Who chooses the news bites, who chooses the news sources, who chooses the news assignments? Again, non-Natives. This was about to change.

ICA was going to be our vehicle to address the world. Our first slogan was "Native Radio for the World." We envisioned a means to capitalize our network. Starting with the CPB funding to organize a Native network by which CPB could communicate with Native communities, we immediately made plans to build upon the momentum. We saw how non-natives have built media empires, we figured we do the same. We could start out serving radio agendas and as we grow, we could systematically expand into other ways Natives use to communicate. If non-natives have ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, BET, NPR, APR, APRN, CPB, NFCB and many others, why couldn't we compile our resources to create a national Native media network? This network could go beyond linking our Native communities together. It could go beyond sharing our insights on world events. This network could offer a new paradigm to national broadcasting.

The Recipe Just Started to Build

Following this line of thought, ICA became a way to create a future for Native Radio. If we linked the Native communities by radio and presented each radio entity as strands of a web, we could net financial resources to address our development needs. This was the first ingredient.

By uniting all Native radio stations under one organization, Native Radio in a plural sense was born. This allowed CPB, federal agencies, foundations and corporations a way to fund larger project concepts that targeted larger numbers of Native people at one time. ICA then could regrant shares to all stations or subcontract project tasks to one or more stations. This is one way to create extra operating money for stations and build a service track record for ICA.

The creation of ICA as the cornerstone for a Native Radio network creates a beginning for a programming distribution center and related careers in the broadcast industry. The future of Native Radio began to reach over the horizons. We were seeing that it is possible to build a Native media system likened to the non-native radio industry. We saw before us a means to make broadcast communications a viable career choice for our people.

Along Comes AIROS, (American Indian Radio On Satellite)

While we were searching for more funding resources and hoping more financial breaks would happen, CPB offered Native Radio money to research the viability to build a Native satellite system. CPB's thinking was, if they are to continue to fund Native programming, it only makes sense that Native community stations had a way to distribute these programs among themselves. ICA agreed.

However, we took the satellite concept a bit further. If we had the capability to share our CPB funded programs among ourselves, we also would have the ability to share all our programs with the world. AIROS makes it possible to actualize our dreams. What we

saw as topic areas for Native people to focus programming efforts on, will become the words we speak as the missing voice on world wide affairs.

The future of Native Radio grows ever larger. We now see that beyond making available our program productions, we are looking to developing a myriad of broadcast support production careers. When we look at the support credits run on the TV or movie screens, we envision similar jobs for Native people working on Native productions.

Just as the non-native media industry started with radio, then developed into TV, cable, long distant telephone relay systems, satellite communications, sub carrier systems, and fiber optics, we see a similar future for Native based industry components.

Technical Applications and Knowledge

The advantage Native Radio development has over non-native radio experience is, we were able to watch how people used the media before we tried to create an industry of our own. As mentioned above, I think radio was made for Native people. By this I mean we have maintained an oral tradition. Indians can talk, and many of us have something to say.

As we build a future for Native Radio, we must look to what has happened in the world because of the media. The future holds a challenge for our integrity. Do we replicate what non-native media has done? Or, do we create a new paradigm?

These contrasting questions are only the tip of the iceberg. Before we go too much further, Native people must look into themselves. It is easy to see the technology at hand. It is easy to learn how to operate the equipment. It will be much harder to decide upon how we use our own media system.

Society, in part, blames the media for many social woes. We too must be sensitive to the extent we may add to the problem. If we wisely examine how media has been used, we could very well attempt to reverse social disorders. If such activity is our calling, we must not create a system that operates the same way the current non-native system operates. If we want change, we must change the way we operate, first.

If we decide to accept this challenge, or if we decide we want our turn at bat using the same methods non-natives use, the technology will be the same. The digital technology driven system opens many doors for us. Most of us in radio started out with analog equipment. Digital technology will lead us in two directions at once. First, digital equipment will allow us to produce faster and cleaner. However, the second road does not necessarily mean each of us will be producing more material. The digital bandwidth will have many more paths to explore. This means no one person working in radio today will be able to explore all possibilities. The logical development needed to

efficiently use digital technology is to train more people how to use the overall media system.

The future of Native Radio will expand so rapidly, it will be like a black whole. It will take all the energy of today's Native Radio producers, engineers, programmers, editors, sound mixers, reports, announcers, writers, schedulers, managers, development directors, program directors, publicists, linguists, coordinators, administrators, volunteers, and then some, to fill all the service applications digital technology makes available.

We May Build Our Own On-ramp.

Native Radio in the future will expand beyond what is heard on the current signals. What is heard today, may still be heard, however, the digital frequencies allow much more available bandwidth space per station. AIROS will play a huge role in the use of this space. And stations will play a big role in serving their communities with the added AIROS services.

Because of the inherent capabilities of digital technology, public broadcasting will eventually fragment into defined sub-cultures. Each sub-culture will be identified by the message they bring to the public. Meaning, radio in general will go the same way as the magazine industry. While radio may target specific populations now, in the future the messages they bring to the same target population will become more focused. Diversity in programs broadcasted by any one station will evolve to the coverage of many more topics by any one station using a single identifiable viewpoint. Diversity broadcasting as we know it today, will evolve to diversity broadcasting across the digital spectrum.

Because of the new capabilities digital service, public radio will open another multi channel lane in the great Information Highway. This is what the Vice-President's panel did not foresee. One of the major problems of the landline information highway is the virtual fact that the American public already travels from point to point by car, train, muni, metro, bus, van, boat or by foot. It is very difficult to remain plugged into a landline system while one is on the go. That's where digital radio satellite systems come in. This is the on-ramp.

The Highway is a Tollway

Native Radio then evolves into Native Telecommunications. All of the jobs currently held at radio stations will be absorbed and redefined to meet digital standards and aspirations. More jobs in telecommunication will be created by the imaginations of those who want to be involved. What we understand as radio programs today will spin off into multimedia programs of tomorrow, just as old time radio theater spun off into TV sitcoms.

The American public will always want to know what is happening in the world. Looking at today's media choices, people seems

discontent with the content of national news service offerings. We are seeing more and more specialized interview shows and magazine type media productions. This trend will continue and expand.

The American public will continue to move. Even though communications networks bring people together for meetings via satellite and fiber optics, they will not be able to recreate that face to face, look me in the eye contact that is a major part non-verbal communications. This will require people to travel. People will still need to tap into media channels while on the run. Public tele-radio will bring them what they want, when they want it.

Just as we currently have Muzak, Reading for the Blind, Language learning channels, Chain store inventory systems and such, we will be able to connect the everyday citizen to their nearest public tele-radio base for the latest news and analysis information. We may even be able to connect them to their personal computer at the office or in their homes. The hand held multi-media receivers we read about in sci-fi comics decades ago, will become everyday essentials. People will tune into what is broadcasted and pay for the convenience. Commercial industry manufacturers will pay underwriting or promotional fees to have their icon shown on the hand held view screens across the nation.

Adding Medicinal Herbs to the Stew

The future of Native Radio is all the above. The one question unasked and unanswered is, are we ready for this journey?

AIROS has brought to our attention the thinness of our production capabilities. Using the current standards of actual broadcast time as a measurement tool, Native Radio can not fill twelve hours of broadcast time per day. It may take a year to build up our inventories enough to fill this void. The production problem however is not the real issue. The real issue that gets in the way of fulfilling this dream is, the lack of acknowledgement by tribal governments to see Native Radio or broadcasting as viable career fields.

We mentioned the need to not replicate the standards and practices of non-native media systems. We must also take care that we do not replicate the governance systems we use to run tribal affairs when we design the governance structures of a national Native media system.

ICA is offering workshops to all Native stations and their licensees to help them understand what it takes to operate and maintain a healthy station operation. The healthy station concept involves the healthy behavior of those connected to the station. People at the licensee level, management level, programming level and financial development level, must understand and agree upon the purpose of having a radio station. Once people understand why the program are run on their station,

they will understand better how to fund the station, and they will understand better what it takes to maintain that operation.

ICA sees this workshop as the start of an ongoing service it must provide to the growing need of Native radio. There will always be career changes made within stations that create new station team arrangements. This will require the need for an ongoing Governance and Development training service. As more stations in more Native communities are built, this service will help prevent the newer stations from making the same errors some of us have suffered through. This is an act of preventive medicine.

The development of Native Radio depends on the health of all individual Native Radio stations. The AIROS system may one day absorb ICA, or it may be the other way around, however, in either case it will be the strength of the Native Radio stations that shapes their own future.