Journalism in Indian Country: Story Telling That Makes Sense

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Despite its importance, Native American journalism is rarely included in histories of Native peoples or in most histories and analyses of American journalism. This article applies Carey’s theory of journalism as a state of consciousness to Native American journalism. It explores approaches early Native American journalists took to apprehending and experiencing the cataclysmic changes taking place in their worlds, establishing written identities for their own communities and among their non-Indian neighbors, and adopting and adapting accepted conventions of American journalism. Further, it examines current Native media that work in and expand on the traditions that began in the early 19th century and amid some of the same challenges experienced then.

KEYTERMS American Indian media, Elias Boudinot, Native American journalism, native broadcast, native story telling, traditional cultures

Over 180 years ago, community journalism among American Indians began in what is now Calhoun County, Georgia. The bilingual Cherokee Phoenix, printed in English and Cherokee, was the first regular newspaper published by Indian people, about Indian people, and for Indian people, as well as for a readership that stretched as far as London. During the succeeding 18 decades of print, then electronic, and ultimately web-based media, reservation and urban journalists have used the press in building and reflecting on community, championing Native American rights, correcting mistakes and misinterpretations by mainstream media and preserving important traditions in Indian Country.1

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But despite its importance, Native journalism is rarely referred to in books and articles discussing the history of Native peoples in the United States. The same can be said of most histories of American journalism, the few exceptions carrying scant information about the *Cherokee Phoenix* and usually no mention of what is happening today. Yet, as Carey has theorized, journalism by its very nature is “a state of consciousness, a way of apprehending, of experiencing the world.” (Munson & Warren, 1997, p. 90). Newspapers and other media both facilitate and reflect community consciousness by the stories they tell and the ways they tell those stories, as well as, by contrast, the stories they fail to tell and the ways their telling falls short of the truth. Media neglect or misinterpretation of peoples and cultures, whether benign or malevolent, imposes on those peoples and cultures false identities and communicates those false identities to the rest of the world. This article explores Native journalism through the lens of Carey’s theory, showing how use of the press allowed Native American journalists, using their own written languages as well as English borrowed from their conquerors, to forge new ways of apprehending and experiencing the cataclysmic changes taking place in their worlds. They were establishing written identities for their own communities and among their non-Indian neighbors, adopting some of the accepted conventions of American journalism and adapting them to fit their experiences and their understandings.

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The *Cherokee Phoenix*, official news organ of the Cherokee Nation, began in 1828, first appearing on February 21. Copy was printed in English and in the 86-character Cherokee alphabet introduced seven years earlier by Cherokee silversmith and army veteran Sequoyah, also known as George Guess (Foreman, 1938). The paper’s first editor, Elias C. Boudinot, a schoolteacher and the clerk of the Cherokee National Council, had been commissioned to solicit loans and donations to support the building of the press and the casting of type. Addressing a Presbyterian Church gathering in 1826, he recognized the impact of the printed word, which he called “a spacious channel for the instruction of adult Cherokees” (Boudinot, 1826). Though his primary reference was to printing which had brought the New Testament to the Cherokee Nation, that term also described his vision of the opportunities offered by the printed word and the proposed newspaper, which would exhibit the “feelings, dispositions, improvements, and prospects of the Indians; their traditions, their true character” so as to “diffuse proper and correct impressions” (Boudinot, 1826). As this article will illustrate, his vision would become reality in remarkable ways in the following two centuries.

The *Phoenix* carried official Cherokee Nation documents, news and cultural information, advertising, and news from other tribes. It reflected...
Cherokee realities and values even as it opposed the U.S. government’s planned removal of Cherokees from their lands. When Boudinot decided that agreeing to relocation was the only way to save the Nation, his change in editorial stance led to the end of his editorship and shortly thereafter to his death at the hands of fellow Cherokees. With the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, the closure of the paper in 1834, and the subsequent forced-march removal of the Cherokees and the other of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, journalism in Indian Country went temporarily dormant. When the Cherokees were re-settled in their new capitol at Tahlequah, Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, they authorized a new paper. The Cherokee Advocate began publishing in 1844 and continued until 1906. Other publications were established among the tribes, and in each instance, journalism was dedicated to tribal self-awareness and to ways of coping with forces impinging upon life and survival, as well as to communicating that awareness to other communities.

While the professional Native press was establishing itself, schools and colleges also published newspapers and magazines. The first Hawaiian-language newspapers were produced in mission schools as early as 1834, designed mainly as tools for teaching the printing trade. The young people set type and ran presses for Hawaiian-language publications that ultimately "became widespread and potent political instruments" (Henningham, 1992, p. 149). The same might be said for the 11 publications that appeared between 1880 and 1917 at the government boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which enrolled young Sioux Indians, most against their wills, used the presses and the young people who wrote for and learned to run them "to edit and rewrite Indian identity through the use of the newspapers as disciplinary tools and rhetorical weapons," and as agents of "colonization, assimilation and discipline" (Katanski, 2005, p. 48). Far to the north, Tlinkit Training Academy students in Fort Wrangel, Alaska, introduced The Glacier, a school newsletter, in 1885 (Danky, 1984), aimed at both civilizing and evangelizing. As Katanski and others have demonstrated, student publications in government-sponsored schools helped impose White values and a political and cultural self-awareness inimical to Indians. Indeed, young authors and typesetters frequently had an unwitting hand in promoting the schools’ goals of stamping out the Indian in their pupils with accounts reflecting "white cultural superiority and native inferiority" (Katanski, 2005, p. 50).

Such was not the case with publications produced by students in Cherokee schools. The Cherokee Rose Buds, a magazine printed in Cherokee and English, began in 1848 and was published periodically until 1857 at the Cherokee Female Seminary near Tahlequah, Indian Territory. The weekly Sequoyah Memorial was established at the male seminary there in 1855 (Danky, 1984; Foreman, 1936). Unlike the experience of Carlisle students, for example, writers in both publications used their Cherokee as well as Christian names, and they celebrated the realities of life as Cherokees.
Journalism was for them, in Carey’s phrase, a way of apprehending and experiencing—and describing—the world (Carey, 1974).

Journalistic activity was suspended for the most part during the Civil War, but during Reconstruction, presses were brought back from places where they had been hidden as precaution against vandalism and looting, and the work began again. New papers were established, many partially supported by churches and church groups committed to proselytizing and education; some were printed in tribal languages that missionaries helped put into written form.

Though Native journalism activity was limited in the first half of the 20th century there were impressive beginnings: the crusading Wassaja, of Yavapai Indian Carlos Montezuma, started in 1916; Talking Leaf, begun in Los Angeles in 1935; and Adbhontigii: The Navajo Language Monthly, printed in Navajo with English summaries, which appeared for about two years beginning in 1943. When the New Cherokee Advocate appeared it carried on the nameplate the slogan “Died in 1906—Revived in 1950” (Murphy & Murphy, 1981, p. 55).

In addition to the school press noted above, the early history of journalism by and for Native Americans extends beyond the contiguous and existing states. Hawaii’s Native-language press covered the influx of foreigners and the possibility of annexation that threatened the Hawaiian culture and language. Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika: The Star of the Pacific, the first independent Hawaiian-language newspaper, was published in the 1860s, followed by dozens of politically oriented publications, many supported by “generally sympathetic Caucasians or missionary-trained part-Hawaiians” (Henningham, 1992, p. 150). But with annexation and the end of the Home Rule party also came the death of the last paper in 1948, and there are so few native speakers of the Hawaiian language that none of today’s papers use it, including the few governmental and tourism-oriented publications directed at indigenous Hawaiians (Henningham, 1992).

To the north, and long before statehood, Alaska was home to publications like Alaska Native Brotherhood, established in 1923 in Ketchikan. A successor, Voice of Brotherhood, was begun in Juneau in 1954 by the Alaska Brotherhood and Sisterhood, a Native philanthropic and religious organization. Alaska’s statewide weekly Tundra Times was established in Fairbanks in 1962 to cover threats to Native heritage and the environment caused by Atomic Energy Commission developments in the Arctic. Investigative reporting by editor Howard Rock revealed the contamination of the food chain, a story not being told in mainstream Alaska papers. The Times also unearthed and reported on documents validating Native claims to thousands of acres of Alaska land, a key factor in passage of the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (Murphy, 1982).

Environmental issues, preservation of heritage, and the rights and concerns of indigenous peoples inspired two early national papers that were in the vanguard of Native press resurgence in the lower 48, inspiring
development of a rich diversity of Native media. They became channels for reflecting on issues in ways different from conventions used by mainstream media. *Akwesasne Notes*, for example, began in 1968 to protest injustices against the residents of the Mohawk Reservation. A blockade of the international bridge between Ontario and Cornwall Island, New York, divided the Mohawk Reservation and kept Native people from moving back and forth on their own property (“We never intended”, 1976). In 1969 the paper developed from an informal offset reproduction service into a bi-monthly alternative tabloid headquartered in Hogansburg, New York, with an international circulation of 81,000 and a publishing operation that produced native calendars, books, posters, pamphlets, and, eventually new media. It gave extensive coverage to the American Indian Movement’s takeover of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and its aftermath. It used long, reflective pieces, many gathered from indigenous people around the globe, developing a kind of international indigenous identity. The paper went dormant in the early 1990s, reappeared briefly in 1995, and was discontinued.

*Wassaja*, published in San Francisco from 1973 to the early 1980s by the Indian Historian Press, was a carefully written and edited tabloid with a national and international monthly circulation of over 80,000. It investigated threats to Indian self-determination, education, and land and water rights, and took on trainees and apprentices to encourage the growth of the Native talent pool. Like *Akwesasne Notes* it carried news about Indian people in South America and other countries with significant Indian populations (Murphy & Murphy, 1981) and offered ways for Native readers from many cultures to know about and understand each other.

**TODAY’S NEWSPAPERS**

Boudinot’s “spacious channel” has indeed broadened and deepened since he envisioned it in 1826. The country’s 2.4 million Native Americans are served today by around 280 reservation newspapers and bulletins, 320 urban Indian publications, a small but growing number of independent newspapers, and 100 magazines and journals (Tippeconic et al., 2003). Newsletters, magazines and professional journals, and a variety of media are also produced in schools, colleges, and community groups, some of them prison-based culture groups. Print journalism and broadcast outlets in Indian Country face some of the same challenges as do mainstream media across the country, and thus counting and listing news outlets is a somewhat inexact science. Several online listings, for example, carry names of defunct publications and omit more recent arrivals. Economic woes facing mainstream newspapers began affecting the Native press, although as late as 2008 editors were reporting that they were expanding staffs even as they worked more entrepreneurially to respond to ad revenue shortfalls (Rabouin, 2008).
Native newspapers vary widely in style and format, many of them tabloids, 24 to 36 pages in length. They publish weekly, monthly, or only periodically, and one of the largest papers, the weekly *Navajo Times*, went daily for a short time in 1983. Many publications have developed on-line presences that are attractive, carefully maintained, and generally user friendly, so they can update quickly, make archives readily available and direct readers to other Native publications. At the same time, Giago and others (Giago, 2009; Hayes, 2006; Project for Excellence, 2009) recognize that the digital divide among Native Americans means that many reservation communities are still left off the information highway, and Internet sources are unavailable to large portions of the Native population.

Independent publications can avoid tribal government interference as well as report and comment on issues and events that go beyond the interests and boundaries of individual Indian tribes and nations. Today’s oldest continuing independent, the weekly *Indian Country Today*, began in 1981 in Rapid City, South Dakota, as The *Lakota Times*, designed to provide comprehensive national coverage of events across Indian Country (About Indian Country Today, 2003). Founding editor Tim Giago based Native and non-Native journalists, correspondents, guest columnists, and photographers in key locations across North America. The Oneida Nation of New York purchased *Indian Country Today* in 1989 and offers both print and digital subscriptions. Twenty years later Giago came out of retirement to establish *The Native Sun News* as a statewide independent paper covering South Dakota’s nine Indian reservations. It will not have an Internet presence because Giago recognizes the technology gap facing his targeted markets, where many Indian readers don’t have telephone service, to say nothing of computers and computer access (Giago, 2009).

The twice-monthly tabloid *News From Indian Country: The Nations Native Journal* was founded in 1989 as an independent, Indian-owned business on the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Reservation in Northern Wisconsin. It carries national and international news and commentary, and demonstrates as well as any Native publication the storytelling, environment, and tradition themes Machiorlatti (2006) described. *News from Indian Country* is available in print and digital formats, and its website provides links to a variety of services as well as other Native media.

Established in 1993 as a non-profit alternative to the tribally owned and controlled *Cherokee Advocate*, the *Cherokee Observer* is published in print and online editions. The entrepreneurial *Observer* was born out of frustration with tribal leadership and with the inclination of tribally controlled journalists to intermix news and opinion. Like other independents, the *Observer* also sells a variety of information products, prints some stories in the Cherokee language, and makes Cherokee fonts available for downloading.

*The Native American Times*, which first appeared in 1995 as *Oklahoma Indian Times*, is a twice-monthly newspaper available in print and on-line.
Published independently of tribal, U.S. government, or gaming funds, it is part of the Native Times News, a network of news sources that often supplies news coverage for such national outlets as CNN, NBC News, and ABC News (“About Native Times News,” 2004). Traditional journalistic fare includes education, employment, business coverage, and personals, as well as tribal, national, and international news and environmental issues.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Electronic media were first introduced among Native people in 1937 under the leadership of then Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier. He saw radio as an ideal medium for communication among small and widely scattered tribal communities. National programming on tribal history, culture, and current affairs eventually reached 170 stations from Alaska to Florida, and its effectiveness so impressed President Franklin Roosevelt that he proposed its use in a water conservation effort. Mark Trahant (1995) recounted how Roosevelt asked Navajo Chairman J. C. Morgan to broadcast a message in the vernacular urging Navajos to save water by reducing the size of their livestock herds. Morgan went on air and praised Roosevelt for water development efforts but did not mention herd reduction.

By the mid-1970s in neighboring Canada, with approximately 85 Indian newspapers being published by and for 237,000 Indians and 16,000 Eskimos, broadcast media development was supported by “politician native organizations, a framework and funding for native communications societies, government-sponsored local media projects, and initial northern broadcasting policy statements” (Valaskis, 1992, p. 71). Canada’s film, media, and satellite broadcast policies help provide a variety of communication outlets among far-flung and often isolated Native populations.

In the United States, radio is a powerful tool for Indian communication and community building, with or without government support. Tribal broadcast license applications have increased and it’s estimated that close to 60 station licenses will soon be held by Native groups. Loris Ann Taylor of Native Public Media, a nonprofit that promotes Native American media ownership, has observed that radio crosses socio-economic boundaries and encourages citizen engagement through innovation, creativity and the use of Native languages in its broadcasts (Project for Excellence, 2009; Tippeconnic, Nicholas, & Nelson, 2003). In addition, a small but growing number of telecommunications programs target Indian communities, with the first Native-licensed cable channel, owned by the Tualip Tribe in Western Washington, beginning in 2008. It provides programming to subscribers to Tualip Broadband, the tribe’s Internet and cable provider, as well as to a local cable station, KANU-TV 99. The station’s programming is also available as a live webstream to broadband subscribers anywhere.
Native-owned-and-operated stations in Alaska and the lower 48 states might well be considered “the only national medium in Indian country” (Trahant, 1995, p. 22). Early stations were public, non-profit, almost bulletin board in practice, and served both geographic regions with fairly high concentrations of Indian people and widespread rural Indian populations including Alaska, major parts of the Southwest, the Northwest and parts of the Great Plains, especially the Dakotas.

KYUK-AM/FM in Bethel, Alaska, led the Native broadcasting movement, coming on the air in 1971, followed two years later by KYUK-TV. Native-owned operations, they are members of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and contribute to National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service. The stations’ population base is 90% Native, but, following patterns established early in their history, they serve the informational and entertainment needs of both Native and non-Native populations (Murphy, 1982). Use of the Yup’ik (Eskimo) language in bilingual news programming keeps old words alive and introduces new, more technical words. Local and regional news, bilingual talk shows, educational and entertainment programming, and the all-important weather information serve the needs of often-isolated communities (Keith, 1995).

The first Indian-owned-and-operated noncommercial radio station in the Lower 48, TL Ochini’ Dinee’ Bi-rado, the English/Navajo station, went on the air in 1972. KTDB-FM, Ramah Navajo Radio in Ramah, New Mexico, became the de facto newspaper, telephone, and bulletin board, announcing everything from upcoming pow wows to lost livestock to a widely scattered community. Funded in part by the Ramah Navajo School Board and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, it was a model for other education-based broadcast operations in Indian Country. Like its newer, commercial counterpart, KTNN, also a Navajo-focused station, KTDB is a major information, culture and communication resource for potentially isolated populations. KTDB’s audience is almost entirely Indian, hence its bilingual programming. In October 1975, three years after KTDB began broadcasting, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewas in Belcourt, North Dakota, established KEYA-FM, the second fully operational Indian-licensed and managed FM station in America. A public broadcast station, it is licensed to the Couture School Board, a part of the Turtle Mountain Band to serve Native and non-Native listeners. It was followed in 1983 by KILI-FM, now the largest Indian-owned-and-operated radio station in America (KILI). Broadcasting from Porcupine, South Dakota, it serves the population on three reservations in the Black Hills, spread over 10,000 square miles. It broadcasts in Lakota and English and reaches the Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River, and Rosebud Sioux reservations.

Two Native-owned commercial broadcast operations began in 1971. WYRU-AM, in Red Springs, North Carolina, went on the air to serve a three-community region. The profit-oriented station owned by the Lumbee
tribe was sold to the Beasley broadcast group in 1997 for over a million dollars. Another venture resulted from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which established 13 regional Native corporations to manage the transfer and investment of nearly $1 billion in compensation for the lands lost to Alaska’s Native people by White occupation and settlement. One corporation, the Cook Inlet Regional Corporation, bought radio and television stations in various parts of the country and was the largest minority broadcast owner in the United States until it sold its radio and television properties in 1995 (Trahant, 1995).

KTNN, “Voice of the Navajo Nation,” is a 50,000-watt AM commercial station, the last such license issued in the country, broadcasting from Window Rock, Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation (KTNN). It began operating in February 1986 and quickly became the single most important broadcaster of news and entertainment, as well as public service announcements, in the Navajo language (Keith, 1995, p. 44), especially for the many households without cable access.

Native programming, both news and entertainment, is available on public broadcast stations, especially those associated with colleges and universities. The recent WGBH Boston television series “We Shall Remain,” which premiered on public stations in 2009, is one example. Native American Public Telecommunications, a consortium that began in 1977, provided funding and consultation for the series. NAPT’s mission is to share “Native stories with the world through support of the creation, promotion and distribution of Native media” (Native American Public Telecommunications, n.d.). Its primary constituencies are American Indians and Alaska Natives who produce public broadcast programs, and its programming serves Native communities, public broadcast outlets, and the community at large. Another consortium, American Indian Radio on Satellite, began in 1992 with funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to provide public radio programming to tribal communities and general audiences. Native America Calling, the AIROS flagship program, is a one-hour call-in show featuring prominent guests and issues of interest and concern to Indian communities, distributed Monday through Friday to 52 Native and non-Native radio stations in the United States and Canada (AIROS). A partner, National Native News, started production in 1987 and is the only daily news and information program produced from a Native perspective that can be heard on more than 200 public radio stations nationwide and in Canada (AIROS).

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In his 1973 essay “Colonialism through the Media,” Gerald Wilkinson focused on broadcast initiatives in Indian Country, but his comments are appropriate across the media horizon. He wrote of two levels of the
colonization of American Indian people: through conquest and through mass media control of image and culture. Describing the danger facing Native Americans who “consume the thoughts of others about ourselves and our world,” he urged that “it is time now that we project our own image and stop being what we never really were” (Wilkinson, 1973, p. 7). John Coward (1999, p. 39) wrote of 19th century coverage of what he termed The Newspaper Indian, in which newspapers treated Indians as “obstacles to growth and national expansion,” and carried stories designed to “impress readers with heroic deeds and sensational copy,” heroism, of course, not exhibited by Indians. And even more pointedly, long-time Native American journalist Tim Giago wrote recently that there are “always pieces of news floating around out there about Native Americans that are downright degrading, erroneous and misleading” (Giago, 2009). Mainstream media both reflect and create perceptions of American Indians that, left uncorrected, misinterpret Native cultures and misinform the general public.

The effort to counter the colonialism, error, and misinterpretation began with the early Indian pioneer editors, and it has continued in a diverse and determined commitment to developing Native print and broadcast news media. Machiorlatti (2006) found three themes recurring in Native media, more pronounced than is the case in much of the mainstream press: traditional culture, storytelling and oral traditions, and relationships between people and their environment. These themes are immediately evident in the content, style, and design of Native media, as will be suggested throughout this article.

One key to the growing strength and quality of Native journalism is collaboration, as is encouraged, for example, by groups like the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), Native American Public Telecommunications, and American Indian Radio on Satellite. Each of these groups has a Web presence and can be studied at length. NAJA, which began in 1984 as the Native American Press Association, “serves and empowers Native journalists through programs and actions designed to enrich journalism and promote Native cultures” and “defends challenges to free press, speech and expression” (“Mission Statement”, n.d.). It is the successor to earlier collaborations among Indian media enterprises that brought reservation and urban media enterprises together to reinvigorate the Native media and address barriers and challenges facing Native journalists.

A NAJA predecessor, The American Indian Press Association (AIPA), active from 1970 to 1975, worked to improve American Indian journalism and to respond to what long-time journalist Charles Trimble described as “the lack of proper interpretation of events and priorities in Indian affairs on the part of the mass media.” Trimble and his fellow Indian journalists decried media that “give extensive coverage to sensational and relatively unimportant events in Indian affairs while completely ignoring . . . more significant needs and events” (Murphy & Murphy, 1981, p. 147). The American
Indian Press Association was to be a national fellowship of Native American journalists, have a national news service based in Washington, DC, and conduct conventions, training sessions, and recognition programs for Indian journalists. Another, more geographically limited consortium, the Northwest Indian News Association began in 1978 to gather and disseminate news stories via mail and telephone to about 25 Indian media organizations in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Fiscal concerns inspired the establishment in 1977 of the Indian Newspaper Publishers Association, a cooperative venture in which papers set uniform advertising rates and lobbied as a bloc for advertising sales. The leadership of Native American Public Telecommunications, and American Indian Radio on Satellite in developing today’s rich Native electronic media offerings was discussed earlier.

The major role Native-American print and broadcast journalists play involves covering and reporting on the news of interest and importance to Native communities, especially reservation-based communities. Indian reporters and editors cover tribal leadership as well as the births, deaths and accomplishments of tribal members, realities covered and celebrated nowhere else. They offer opportunities for self-awareness that challenge the often negative images available in mainstream media. Their work can meet challenges, particularly when tribal governments, owners and publishers of many news outlets, are a major focus of their papers’ coverage.

As the familiar adage goes, freedom of the press goes to the one who owns it. In many instances, ownership means the tribal government. As owner and publisher, tribal government has the power to decide what gets covered and how, and who does the covering. Not infrequently the same person plays the roles of tribal newspaper editor and tribal public affairs director, and editors and reporters must decide “how much they’re willing to risk before they publish a story or engage in the normal discourse of journalism” (Trahant, 2000, p. 108). Tom Arviso, long-time Navajo journalist, wrote, “People in power view the press as more of a threat than an asset” (Lincoln Michel, 1997), with tribal publications and their staffs regularly encountering censorship, threats to jobs and funding, closed meetings and records, harassment and physical threats.

As is the case with governmental leaders in countries around the world, our own included, governments do not like to be scrutinized and criticized. They know the power of journalism to create and/or maintain impressions and perceptions. When the tribe owns the publication, it’s tempting and easy to suppress such scrutiny, preferring to dictate representation of tribal realities and tribal self-awareness. Leaders withholding information “for the good of the tribe” often stymie Native journalists covering their home reservations (Edmo-Suppah, 1998, p. 26). They expect their media to report accomplishments rather than crimes, misdemeanors, and malfeasance (Lincoln Michel, 1998). Tribal control and prior censorship can lead to staff turnover through firings and forced resignations, as was the case in Colville, Washington,
when editor Samuel Sampson learned that all *Tribal Tribune* copy had to be reviewed and given pre-publication approval by the tribe’s executive director (Azocar, 2008). Yet, tribal journalists understand why they do what they do: “They have a higher obligation: To inform Indian people about the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable” (Trahant, 1998, p. 2).

Ironically, freedom of communication has long been recognized as important in the life and governance of Indian communities. While Elias Boudinot was out raising funds for *The Cherokee Phoenix*, Cherokee Principal Chief John Ross was drafting a statement about press freedom: “The public press deserves the patronage of the people, and should be cherished as an important vehicle in the diffusion of general information, and as no less powerful auxiliary, in asserting and supporting our political rights” (Foreman, 1936, p. 96). He stressed that, while laws to guard against “admission of scurrilous productions of a personal nature” might be necessary, the press should be “as free as the breeze that glides upon the surface.”

The 1852 Constitution of the Laws of the Choctaw Nation decreed that “the printing press shall be free to every person, and no law shall ever be made to restrain the rights thereof. The free communication of opinions is one of the inviolable rights of man, and every citizen may freely speak, write and print on any subject, being responsible for the abuse of that liberty” (La Course, 1998). The Choctaws recognized that they would best know themselves as a people if they all shared their ideas and concerns.

Over the next century other tribes included free press provisions in their constitutions. Then, 116 years after the Choctaw declaration, the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 mandated that “No Indian tribe in exercising powers of self-government shall (1) make or enforce any law prohibiting the free exercise of religion, or abridging the freedom of speech, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition for a redress of grievances” (25U.S.C.A. 1302).

Tribal government censorship, a continuing problem for Native-American journalists, has been addressed recently as well. The Cherokee Independent Press Act of 2000 reads in part: “The Cherokee Nation’s Press shall be independent from any undue influence and free of any particular political interest. It is the duty of the press to report without bias the activities of the government” (An Act, 2000). In 2003 the National Congress of American Indians passed a resolution endorsing “the principles of free speech, free press, and the rights of the people to have access to information and/or to communicate and express freely information and carry out media in an independent manner” (National Congress of American Indians, n.d.). NCAI’s resolution also encouraged tribal nations to develop specific and written policies in support of press freedom. As the leading organization of Indian journalists, NAJA frequently addresses free press challenges in its programs and annual conventions, keeping the Native media world aware of free press problems. “It is especially important for tribal papers to be a fair
and accurate source for tribal news and information because it becomes their own story, in their own words,” NAJA’s president wrote recently (Azocar, 2008, p. 30).

But, as journalists and legal scholars agree, neither the spirit nor the letter of the 1968 provision is the operating norm on many reservations, and for several reasons. Indian tribes are sovereign nations vis-à-vis the United States government, and the Indian Civil Rights Act can be viewed as interference with tribal sovereignty. Thus, for example, cases brought under the Act are to be heard in tribal courts, according to a 1978 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez. In addition, neither NCAI’s recommendations nor those of NAJA need to be followed, and what works for one tribe may not be acceptable for another.

Though the key target audience of most Native media operations has always been their Indian communities, a second major goal of many media in Indian Country is to reach the non-Native population, to educate and correct misinterpretations and outright fallacies described above by Wilkerson, Coward, and Giago, as well as to make up for the alternative, the often intentional neglect on the part of the majority media. In addition, the Native media have been important training grounds for members who have joined the mainstream media, bringing broader perspective and greater ability to ask and find answers to questions that often do not occur to non-Native reporters and editors, providing information and insights useful to mainstream editors, legislators, business people, and the general public (Chavez, 1996).

Despite the information and talent pool available to White-owned-and-operated print and broadcast media, diversity initiatives and goal setting have shown dismal results as regards Native Americans in the work force. The yearly Diversity Survey of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) charts progress toward newsroom diversity, and the 2009 report showed only 293 Native Americans among the more than 47,000 employees in American newsrooms, down from an all-time high of 324 in 2007 (“ASNE Census Results,” 2010). Though comparable data are not available for the broadcast media, the National Association of Broadcasting (NAB), through its educational foundation, acknowledges the desirability of diversity. (NAB Foundation, n.d.).

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

In the 21st century, the spacious channel envisioned by Elias Boudinot includes many media, involving skilled, creative, and determined journalists serving their own tribes and nations and educating non-Indian communities about the realities in Native-American life. The very existence of Native newspapers, print and on-line magazines, radio stations, television programming, motion pictures, and various Web tools testifies to the human need to
understand and grapple with experience, to make meaning and sense of life and to have that meaning presented fairly and honestly. Native journalists help tell stories and provide news and information not available elsewhere. As they reflect on the events and issues that form the realities of Native American life, they help build and maintain community.

At the same time, coverage by the Native press complements the work of mainstream journalism (Katanski 2005). Reporters and editors in both groups present the stuff from which their publics create reality, make sense, and experience the world. Insights that grow out of the experiences of one group can enhance and, where needed, correct the understanding of the other. In addition, a slowly growing body of research into the roles, uses, and impact of Native press systems can enhance an overall understanding of the role of journalism in the life of the country. For example, publications by Rolo (2000), Thames (n.d.), and Trahant (1995) were prepared to assist mainstream journalists who want to better understand and more correctly represent Native American individuals and communities.

These information channels are thriving as well among the Native journalists of the future. For example, NAJA sponsors Project Phoenix, a training program that recruits young talent to produce print and electronic coverage of NAJA’s annual convention and supports scholarships and other special training programs. Through Native Voice, a college journalism project; and Rising Voices, a high school project, the organization is developing prospective Indian journalists. The Freedom Forum sponsors the American Indian Journalism Institute, and schools, colleges, and Native newspaper staffs run workshops and journalism camps to prepare tomorrow’s Native American journalists.

Bambi Kraus, president of the National Association of Tribal Historical Preservation Officers, wrote of the need for journalists covering Indian Country to “hear from Indian people themselves. For much of the past two centuries, the Indian story has been told by non-Natives” who “relied on outdated history books or non-Indian ‘experts’” instead of “starting the story in Indian country” (Rolo, 2000, p. 17). The work of Native American journalists is directed toward that goal and has, for over 180 years, been the “spacious channel” envisioned by that first editor, Elias Boudinot. He would most likely be pleased indeed.

NOTES

1. By way of clarification, the terms Indian, American Indian, and Native American are used interchangeably among Native media people, and different terms have been favored across the 180 years of Native-American press history (Rolo, 2000). “First Nations” is also sometimes used, more often in Canada. The term Indian Country is also often used by Native journalists, in publication titles, and in references to their media. It uses the 18 U.S.C. 1151 definition, “land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government.” Culturally distinct from American Indians, Alaska
Natives prefer that title to any of the others. Similarly, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are a distinct group and do not use the terms Indian and Native American.

2. The term Five Civilized Tribes referred to the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations; these tribes were the most active in journalism during the 19th century.

3. A number of listings are available, some more current than others, because of the fluid state of the print media. The carefully prepared Tippeconnic listings are helpful, as are lists available online at sites like the following: http://www.aushcomp.com/Redman/print_publications.htm, http://www.nativeamericancwic.org/native_american_newspapers.html, and http://www.nativeweb.org/resources/news_media_television_radio/newspapers_-_native_indigenous/


REFERENCES


