

THE STATE OF NATIVE RADIO: HISTORY OF THE REPORT

The following report was prepared in 1987 on behalf of the Native American Radio Training Project, funded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and carried out by Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, now known as Native American Public Telecommunications, Inc.

The project provided on-site technical assistance and training in both management and production, and a team of us spent nearly a year during 1986-87 visiting a dozen reservation-based radio stations to provide skills workshops and management support. During the course of the project, I spent at least one week on-site at eight different stations, and I made return trips to four.

While CPB required a final report from the Training Project, they requested only a narrow accounting of project activities. They did not request nor were they expecting a major analysis of the state of the Native stations at that time.

However, I had observed a number of shared conditions and issues that carried across a large group of Native stations. I knew these were radically different from the concerns of nearly all other public radio stations and also that these issues were invisible within the system as a whole.

Consequently, I thought this was an important opportunity to give CPB and all of public radio, a broad picture of the importance and unique problems facing radio stations in Indian Country.

I prepared this extensive assessment on my own initiative, and the opinions and conclusions were solely my own. The findings and recommendations in the report were based on my direct observations and activities at the stations, as well as drawing from my extensive experience with community radio station operations and my familiarity with national public radio issues and policies.

For nearly a decade, this was the only overview available that described Native radio. I am grateful to Frank Blythe, Executive Director of NAAPT, for including it in the final project report and pleased that it has been used heavily as a major planning document and guide to strengthening Native stations.

Native radio has changed a great deal since I wrote this paper – conditions on many reservations have improved, and now there are many more stations, outstanding Native-produced national programming, a 24-hour satellite network in place, and an increased level of cooperation among stations for common planning and problem solving. But some of the underlying problems exist unchanged, and too many stations remain financially and politically vulnerable.

Native radio stations are a small but vibrant and critical voice, not only within public radio, but as part of the broadcast spectrum as a whole. As the media environment continues to evolve, I believe they themselves will continue shaping the system around them to reflect their particular needs and values.

*Nan Rubin
11/2000*

**REPORT ON THE FINDINGS AND CONCERNS
FOR NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLIC RADIO**

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REPORT ON THE FINDINGS AND CONCERNS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLIC RADIO

THE MARGINAL STATE OF NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLIC RADIO

Indian reservation public radio stations face a unique set of circumstances, based on common condition, which have led to a set of shared difficulties. Although the management training was successful in addressing some of the immediate problems facing the stations involved, it was neither designed for, nor capable of, assisting the station in planning for their long-term viability or in solving their chronic financial and structural weaknesses.

Lack of Locally-Based Funding Resources

The condition on each reservation are not identical, but overall, these stations lack of base for developing diverse local funding support.

1. Most stations now rely on a single source for the majority of their operations funds: The tribal governments, the tribal business council, or the tribal school board. In all cases, the sources of founding for these bodies is federally-based. With recent major cutbacks in funding for Native American programs, these sources of funds are being withdrawn from the radio stations to be used for other more pressing reservation needs.

The stations are thus threatened with losing up to 95% of their operating funds within a short period of time, with little experience, assistance or opportunity to find placement support within the short time frame. Also, those stations which are CPB qualified are at the minimally qualified level, and even a slight decrease in funding could jeopardize this standing.

2. Because these stations are all in rural areas with sparse populations, even the stations which serve large geographic regions have an extremely small audience base to draw on for listener support. KILI, with 100,000 watts reaching most of southern South Dakota, for example, has less than 40,000 people within its signal area; KNNB, serving the White Mountain Reservation in Arizona with 5 translators, reaches only 15,000 potential listeners.

The reservation populations are poor, with unemployment rates as high as 85%. By and large, populations listen to their stations and rely on them, but they simply do not have the means to adequately fund station operations through direct donations.

3. Most of these reservations have few business enterprises. Off-reservation commercial activities are widely scattered and suffering heavily from the crisis in the farm and construction economies. Thus underwriting support is not a major option for developing substantial, reliable station income.
4. In those states which provide support for public broadcasting, these stations operate outside that system. Because they are not part of a university-based or fine-arts state wide network, they are not eligible to receive state funds allocated to support these type of stations. In some regions, the reservation stations have built their own translator networks and are seen by the state-funded broadcasters as direct competition.

Lack of Programming Resources

The informational, cultural and educational interests of Indian audiences differ greatly from those of non-Indian residents within listening areas of these stations.

Nationally produced non-music programming relevant to Indian listeners is virtually nonexistent within the public radio system. Of the 15 station involved with this project, only 6 are currently members of National Public Radio, with NPR providing less than 10% of the programming on any station.

The stations must produce most of the non-music programming on their own, using their own limited expertise and facilities for production, resulting in productions of inconsistent quality.

Lack of Human Resources

Reservation conditions do not encourage residents to become volunteers involved with their radio stations.

1. There are few Native Americans trained in management skills who are willing to work at the radio stations. Most of the station managers were ill-prepared for this specialized position and have had to learn their skills on the job. Tribal members trained in such other station needs as program production, development, etc. are rare.

Training opportunities for staff are limited, and the relative isolation of these stations makes it difficult to participate in public radio training activities. Volunteers come to the station unskilled, and their ability to become trained rests solely with the level of skill already existing at the station.

2. The same isolation and unfamiliar cultural context do not attract many non-Indians to become staff at reservation stations. There is some ambivalence at the stations about having non-Indian staff members.
3. The cultural background of many Indian people does not include the concept of “volunteering.” In areas with such high unemployment, the idea of working for nothing runs counter to the need to find paying work.
4. Because different communities on many reservations are widely separated, traveling between them is often difficult. The long distances, often severe weather, and lack of reliable transportation keeps the number of available station volunteers low.

Dysfunctional Organizational Structures

With the exception of KILI, all the reservation stations are controlled directly or indirectly by a licensee controlled by the tribe. In some cases, the tribal council is the actual licensee; in other cases, the council directly chooses the members of the station board.

1. Tribal politics are often volatile and council elections are often highly emotional. Too frequently, the radio stations are subject to being used for political ends, and their ability to secure tribal support may depend more on staying in favor with the current leadership than on their public radio activities. This keeps the station in a state of insecurity and powerlessness.

2. Tribal councils, much like college trustees, have many different priorities which they oversee, and operating a radio station is only one of these concerns. Many of these councils have little understanding of the service value their radio station provides to their other activities, or as a means in itself. They are unfamiliar with the public radio system, and are frequently apathetic to the needs of the station. Some councils are actually hostile towards their stations. Consequently, funding for radio becomes a very low priority and station governance is ignored.
3. Even when the tribal council or board is supportive of the station, funding for operations is currently eroding as federal funds become more limited. The stations are being forced to compete for support with programs which provide direct services or have a more visible economic benefit to the tribe.

Racist Attitudes Against the Stations

Radio waves are not bound by political boundaries, and nearly every one of the reservation stations reaches a substantial number of non-Indians who live both on and off the reservations. Relations between these groups is not often cooperative.

1. Efforts of the stations to raise funds has generated hostility from non-Indians in surrounding communities who see these activities as economic and political competition.
2. Perception of the stations as being exclusive keeps non-Indians from participating as supporters and volunteers.
3. People outside the station think that the tribes or federal assistance are taking care of all the station's financial needs. They are unwilling to buy underwriting or provide other support because they don't think the station needs it.

POSITIVE FACTORS OF NATIVE AMERICAN RADIO

Despite all the drawbacks faced by these stations, they also share a number of positive conditions which can help create support for their activities.

The Stations are a Source of Pride for their People

In places where there are few positive examples of successful activities, the radio station can be a very public, visible accomplishment which is seen as a high source of pride. It legitimizes the concerns which Indian people have and serves as a public statement of self-determination.

1. The stations provide jobs. Providing employment opportunities is a top priority on every reservation, even with inconsistent support, each station is a source of jobs.
2. Every reservation-based radio station provides paid employment for at least one to five full-time positions.
3. At CPB-qualified station, five or more positions are in place, which is a considerable number of paid personnel.
4. These jobs often provide personal motivation and pride for the people filling them. The jobs are real, concrete work, which are evident in the community just by turning on the radio. They provide people with real skills which can also be used off-reservation.

They Provide a Strong Identity for the Reservation

The stations are able to break down barriers which exist between the reservation and the off-reservation community.

1. They are a strong vehicle for educating non-Indians about the history, culture, conditions and activities of reservation populations.
2. They are able to share cultural values, experiences and events, making them accessible to listeners. By broadcasting in Native languages and focusing on local customs and practices, they reinforce the value of tribal cultures and the identity of Indian people. At the same time, by broadcasting positive images, they can counter many of the negative racist stereotypes held by non-Indians.

3. The stations also broadcast news, information and other programming relating directly to the needs and concerns of reservation populations. This gives legitimacy to these concerns and strengthens their importance, especially when they are not addressed by any other media.
4. They have a unique identity. The reservation-based public radio stations are special in the public radio arena, because they represent a particularly unique and little understood segment of American ethnic culture. Given the opportunities, they see themselves as being able to share their own concerns with each other, and also bring their little-heard voice to the greater public radio audience. They are a terribly undervalued resource which has the potential for elevating our national understanding of and appreciation for Native American people.

The Radio Stations are Sometimes the Only Media Available

To places like Pine Ridge, SD; Zuni NM; and Ignacio CO, the reservation radio stations are the only media available. There are no daily papers, few or only long-distance radio station signals can be heard, and they are often too far away from reliable television signals.

1. The public radio service is the only reliable means of communicating timely news, public service announcements, and information to area residents.
2. On many reservations, there is very limited telephone service. The public radio stations provide emergency information and announcements in the most efficient manner possible.
3. Entertainment opportunities in these rural areas are limited. The stations provide entertainment for people in their homes, and also serve as sponsors for many such activities as teen dances, sport and civic events, and cultural celebrations. Broadcasting these activities bring to the entire reservations, not just the people who are able to attend.

Most of the Stations Have Adequate Facilities

Because many of the stations were built with funds from the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program, they have good production facilities with relatively new equipment. Their transmission systems are strong, and most have satellite dishes or will be installing them soon, thus connecting them with the rest of the system. However, they often lack qualified technical expertise to keep the

facilities maintained and repaired. [And this equipment would need to be replaced within a few years.]

FUTURE TRENDS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN RADIO

Some of the problems outlined are the same problems facing public radio station serving rural communities around the country. However, many of the problems are inherent in the financial and organizational structures of these stations alone.

Long term viability of the stations will rest on their ability to overcome some of the major barriers they face individually, as well as those they share.

Their Federal Funding Base Will Continue to Erode

These stations cannot rely on the continued availability of federal support channeled through their tribal structures. Not only are the funds themselves becoming more restricted in their use, but tribal entities are increasingly reluctant to support the operations of the stations due to more pressing social needs on reservations.

1. Vehicles must be developed to assist each station in diversifying their local funding based on the opportunities which are appropriate in their areas.
 - They need assistance in developing on-air fundraising techniques for their audiences;
 - In places where underwriting is possible, they need to explore this option;
 - They need to develop their own fundraising events and “for-profit” ventures wherever feasible.

The recent formation of the Coalition of Native American Public Radio Stations is a step in that direction.

2. Many programs available which can provide specific kinds of assistance aren't used because they are unknown to station personnel. Station staff need more information on resources which might be available to them from public broadcasting sources, Indian-oriented sources, state programs, etc.
3. Few of the stations have staff skilled at researching and writing grant proposals. They need assistance in locating possible foundation support and writing grants to request funding.

4. Because funding options locally are limited, the stations need to research what resources might be developed from outside their immediate areas – state-wide, regionally, and nationally. They should explore the realistic possibilities of developing national support, through such mechanisms as national foundations, underwriters and private funding.

If station governing boards do not assume appropriate roles in developing station support and policy, the political role of the station will continue to be uncertain.

A major ongoing problem which staff are unable to address on their own is the unstable nature of their own governing boards and the unpredictable impact which the boards exercise. Without supportive boards, some of the reservation-based public radio stations will continue to face uncertain futures.

1. Tribal entities need to be educated on the value of their public radio stations. The stations need to be recognized as important tribal resources, worth support and work their attention. They especially need to understand the legal responsibilities which go along with the FCC license.
2. Most Indian people sitting on radio boards have little experience in being a board member. Functioning boards need additional training in how to do their jobs, how to work with their staff, and how to be advocates for their station. They need to know what resources might be available in their own region or from other stations to help the body function better.
3. Where appropriate, advisory committees or support groups should be set up to assist the station in development and recruitment activities, give feedback and assistance to staff, and serve as a political buffer.
4. Some stations may want to explore the possibility of setting up an independent group to hold the license. This kind of effort will involve weighing the legal, political and financial issues together.

Programming will continue to be locally based, but there will be more opportunity to use and participate in national production activities through existing satellite interconnection and NAPBC's radio production fund.

Most of the reservation-based stations see one of their main functions as providing their immediate population with programming in native language, local public service announcements, and similar services. Addressing local needs will always be the bulk of their on-air production efforts. But the recognition among the station that they can easily share interesting programs can allow them to diversify their programming sources and share their quality programs.

1. The public radio satellite system has made inexpensive program distribution accessible to nearly every station in the public radio system. The satellite interconnection makes it possible for even the most remote station to stay informed of national policy discussions and to take advantage of a wide range of excellent programming. Efforts should be made to help those stations without satellite dishes to acquire them.
2. As a coalition working with NAPBC, the reservation-based radio stations can take advantage of this exciting network to exchange their own programming among the stations and for encouraging independent producers and others to produce programming they can use. They can make themselves visible as a group of stations with a special programming interest within the public radio system to encourage program production that meets their special needs.
3. The existing funding is encouraging the efforts of NAPBC to act as a distributor of radio programs by Indian producers and reflecting the concerns of Indian people, and to represent the interests of the station in radio programming discussions on a national level.
4. Those stations which are CPB qualified can work cooperatively in spend their national programming grants on collaborative ventures.

The radio stations will continue to serve as a means to train tribal members in such sophisticated skills as management, production, writing and promotion. The radio stations are some of the strongest, most creative reservation enterprises which provide challenging, productive

work for employees. But learning the necessary specialized radio skills is difficult with the limited resources available in most reservation environments.

1. Some station staff have learned these skills off-reservation in school, at other jobs, or at other radio stations, but the largest number of staff are untrained when they come to the station. The reservation-based stations need to know about the range of training opportunities for all skill levels and positions which are available through the public broadcasting system.
2. Scholarships and other kinds of financial support should be made available to assist station in sending staff to training activities.
3. The stations should be assisted in setting up staff exchanges, station visits, and other vehicles to facilitate sharing human resources and expertise among themselves.
4. Efforts should be made especially to strengthen the skills of station managers, including participating in structured management training workshops, conferences and regular interaction with the managers from other stations.

Racist attitudes against Native Americans will continue to hamper some station operations, but the stations can play an important role in reducing tension, if they chose to. Radio is an intimate, powerful way to reach people, and they respond to it in a very personal way. If any of the reservation-based stations chose to make this one of their program priorities, they could have a long-term impact of improving community relations within their regions.

THE ROLE OF CPB FOR NATIVE AMERICAN RADIO

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting has identified three major areas of concern in which it has taken an active role in addressing station needs:

Financial Well-Being of Public Radio Stations – The Corporation for Public Broadcasting has a long-established set of criteria by which eligible radio stations can receive operating support on

a yearly basis. Of the 15 stations involved with this project, only six are currently meeting CPB eligibility criteria.

1. However, all of these stations have budgets which, according to the latest figures from CPB are at the very bottom level for qualified stations. Two additional stations which had been qualified have recently dropped just below qualification level. At best, the reservation-based public radio stations are marginal in terms of being able to maintain their CPB qualification levels, and even small fluctuations in their income levels or sources can result in their losing their CPB status. Given the insecure funding sources, there is a high likelihood that several additional stations could lose qualifications within the next two years.
2. These stations are very important within the public radio system, not only as a sources of diversity in ownership, but more importantly as a concrete indication that the system takes seriously its Congressional mandate to serve ALL Americans, including Native Americas, with public radio. The existence of these handful of stations proves that public radio truly can reach diverse, special minority listenerships.
3. CPB itself has recognized the need to provide special assistance to minority-controlled public radio stations, through such important efforts as the Management Opportunity Program grants and other initiatives. At this point, the Corporation should look carefully at what might e done (within its mandate) to provide direct or indirect aid to this group of stations to keep them from losing their qualification status.
4. The Corporate could meet with several representatives from the station and NAPBC in a “brainstorming” session, where together the participants can discuss appropriate ways in which the Corporate can use its existing resources and programs to provide the stations with a concerted commitment to their financial survival. The might involve such activities as –
 - a. Consideration of a combined MOP grants on behalf of all the stations to provide them with shared resources for specific fundraising activities;
 - b. Encouraging stations to take advantage of the Station Advisory Service for continued focus on fundraising activities;

- c. Perhaps adding someone to the Station Advisory Committee who is particularly familiar with the Indian stations who can provide them with appropriate consultation;
- d. Extending such efforts as the Public Participation Project to educate local tribal entities on the values of their public radio stations;
- e. Staying in close touch with station that might be in danger of falling below qualification levels to see if there are ways to muster enough resources for them to stay qualified.

Development of Human Resources – The Corporation has made an ongoing commitment to training and development of human resources, especially in strengthening management skills, in broadening the range of skills training available in individuals, and in supporting minority hiring at stations.

1. However, until the NAPBC Indian Radio Training Project, these initiatives had never included many Native Americans or had a strong impact on their reservation-based stations. Consequently, the station feel left out of these opportunities and very few Native Americans have benefited from these programs. A special effort in this area could be applied to the reservation-based stations within the current CPB-training and development programs.

Possible activities include:

- a. Aiming a special recruitment effort at these stations to send staff to the Management and Mid-management training seminars;
- b. Encouraging them to submit Training Grants for appropriate staff and in-service activities, and providing assistance to write competitive grants;
- c. Setting aside scholarship funds to assist station staff in attending such system-wide gatherings as the Radio Development conference, the NFCB Training Conference, NPR Production Training Seminars, regional public radio training activities, etc.
- d. Providing assistance for the station managers to meet on a regular basis to exchange resources, report on mutual progress, and plan cooperative fundraising projects;
- e. Actively including the reservation-based stations in both listing positions within the CPB Job Bank and also in seeking suitable candidates for station positions;

- f. Inviting station personnel to participate on panels, committees, and other policy-making bodies with the system, and encouraging their participation within other public radio organization.

Support for Public Radio Programming -- the final area in which the Corporation has taken an active role has been in supporting the development of national public radio programming. The corporation retains a mandate to develop public radio programming which will serve special interest and minority audiences, but recent changes at CPB have dramatically shifted the methods being used to allocate its programming funds. On one hand, programming funds are now going directly to stations for their individual or collective purchasing of national programming. On the other, CPB has implemented its own distribution of funds to support major national-level public radio productions.

1. Up to now, CPB funds have supported almost no national radio productions which are useful to the reservation-based station, or which extend the concerns of Native Americans to the broader public radio audience. Both of the funding mechanism now being used could provide the reservation-based station with means for developing programming vehicles which will speak specifically to their needs. The ability to use these programming funds is also a strong argument for keeping these stations at CPB-qualified levels.
 - a. These stations should be encouraged to devise means of combining their NPG funds to produce programming which can be shared with the larger public radio system.
 - b. NAPBC can also help provide cooperative efforts to distribute available radio programming, and to locate additional programming which might be of interest.
 - c. It is unlikely that any Native American radio station or independent producer can successfully compete for funding from the Radio Program Fund, now or in the immediate future. A special effort should be made to examine how the reservation-based stations can have access to some of the funds currently earmarked for national production, especially to serve this important group of underserved listeners.

- d. Funds from this source can also provide marketing and distribution support for programming produced for regional and national distribution, to insure accessibility to other reservation-based stations and, when appropriate, to extend their carriage to the system as a whole.
- e. CPB can assist the stations in developing cooperative marketing materials which can attract foundation, corporate and other support specifically to underwrite programming projects.

It is our desire that CPB policies will continue to support the needs and impact of Native radio as a valuable group of public radio stations, and we encourage CPB to continue working with Indian radio to become producing participants in the national system.

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