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American Indian Media Today

Tribes Maintain Majority Ownership as Independent Journalists Seek Growth

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Introduction*

STATE OF NATIVE MEDIA: TAKEAWAYS

- Like other media sectors, Native print media has had a significant downturn. In 1998, there were some 700 media sources serving Indian Country, today there are about 200 media sources ranging from tribe-owned newspapers to freelancers.
- Radio is a bright spot for Native media. Radio stations serving American Indian listeners have increased from 30 to 59 during the last 20 years.
- Prospective Native journalists face challenges in building careers with a dearth of degree programs in journalism at tribal college and universities.
- Press freedom for tribe-owned media is a key challenge faced by Native American media. Tribal governments remain the largest media owners and control an estimated 72 percent of newspapers and radio stations.

Native American media emerged from the need for tribes to advocate for their sovereignty and lives during the 1820s and 1830s.[1] Today, Native media remains committed to its advocacy roots, but with the majority of Native media being owned by tribal governments, Native American media often acts to promote tribal government messages to Native people rather than work to hold those governments accountable to the communities they serve. However, there is an emerging independent Native American media landscape that is trying to fill this gap and trying to ensure that the stories of Native Americans are told.

This report provides a snapshot of Native media in the 21st Century as told in interviews with journalists and media practitioners of independent reporting—meaning their operation is not owned, controlled or overseen by a tribe or a tribe-appointed communications board. The independent media voices here have expressed the importance of delivering independent-driven news so as to better inform their community, often doing the work with a limited budget; they also stress the need for more journalists who have appropriate media skills to report on current events.

In addition, this report relies on a preliminary database that includes a compilation of sources, including material provided by Mark Trahant, an independent journalist and editor of Indian Country Today, the Native American Journalists Association, and the Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance. While print media is in decline, the number of radio stations has nearly doubled from 30 to 59 during the last 20 years.[2] As for a national television

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* **NOTE:** The author has used the terms "Native American" and "American Indian" interchangeably throughout this report, in keeping with the *Native American Journalists Association Style Guide*, available at: **https://www.naja.com/sites/naja/uploads/2018/2018_NAJA_AP_Atyle_Guide.pdf**.

presence, the United States pales in comparison to First Nations broadcast programming in Canada where the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in 2002 launched the world's first news program with a team of Indigenous television journalists.[3] No such television news programming exists in the United States.[4] The data shows that tribes own some 72 percent of radio and newspapers in Indian Country, lending to the discussion of advocacy journalism versus a need to nurture independent media.[5]

"In Indian Country, an independent press is the exception and not the norm," said Bryan Pollard, NAJA president. "When our tribal media is able to report independently and without fear of retribution from tribal officials, then the light of truth and transparency can affect our media organizations, our Native journalists, and our democracies through empowered, impactful, and truthful storytelling."[6]

The Start of the Native American Press

The first edition of the first American Indian newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, was printed Feb. 21, 1828 in New Echota, Georgia, in the midst of turbulent times for the Cherokee and tribes in the Southeastern United States.[7] For centuries, the Cherokee inhabited ancestral territory that once included Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. In the 1830s, an estimated 125,000 Native people lived on millions of acres of land from the Everglades and Blue Ridge Mountains to the Atlantic Coastal Plains and Appalachian Mountains.[8]

The Cherokee Nation had been forced to cede aboriginal territory to encroaching European immigrants. As the Cherokee adapted the ways of their immigrant neighbors, they eventually became known as one of five "civilized" tribes in the region. By the early 1820s, Sequoyah had developed a Cherokee syllabary. With forced removal from their homelands reaching climatic levels, the tribe established the Cherokee Phoenix.[9]

Two years later, in 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, a federal policy endorsed by President Andrew Jackson to forcibly remove Indians from the southeastern United States to lands west of the Mississippi River. *The Cherokee Phoenix* editors addressed the concerns of the Cherokee and chronicled their plight of removal. They even argued their case in the U.S. Supreme Court, resulting in the 1831 landmark decision, Cherokee Nation v. Georgia. In a second Supreme Court case, Worcester V. Georgia, 1832, the court ruled that Cherokee treaty-based land boundaries could not be redrawn. President Jackson defied the U.S. Supreme Court ruling: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it."The forced removal policy resulted in the removal of 15,000 Cherokee from their lands in the Southeastern U.S. in what has become known as the "Trail of Tears," a testimony to the 4,000 who died on the journey to Oklahoma.[10]

"In Indian Country, an independent press is the exception and not the norm."

—Bryan Pollard, NAJA president

The Cherokee Phoenix was published for six years until settlers burned it down. The Hunter Library *Cherokee Phoenix* Project describes the paper's accomplishments:

> "During the Phoenix's brief existence, it addressed the wide spectrum of concerns that affected the Cherokee people, both major and minor. The Cherokee Phoenix's columns reflect both a unique and yet startlingly familiar portrayal of its era. While readers in any American community would have recognized the news items and features, it offered the viewpoint and concerns of a Native American nation. Its columns included editorials which embodied the Cherokees' determination to retain their lands; news on the activities of the Cherokee government as well as relations with the federal and state governments; accounts about the Cherokees in Arkansas and other Native American nations; and social and religious activities in the Nation. Major events that warranted extended coverage included Congressional debates over the Indian Removal Act, the two U.S. Supreme Court decisions which affected Cherokee rights (Cherokee Nation v. Georgia and Worcester v. Georgia), and actions by the state of Georgia to assume title to Cherokee lands.
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> "The Cherokee Phoenix did not survive to give an account of the Cherokee Nation's last days in the east. It had ceased publication on May 31, 1834. However, its six-year run helped preserve the interests, hopes, and struggles of individuals and of a unique community."[11]

The newspaper rose from the ashes in 1844 after the Cherokee rebuilt their lives in Oklahoma. It also re-emerged in 1975 as the Cherokee Advocate and finally reclaimed its original name in 2000. That same year, the Tribal Council passed the Cherokee Independent Free Press Act of 2000 to ensure tribal government coverage is free of political influence. Today, the *Cherokee Phoenix* has expended outreach including local radio programming and content on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.[12]

Forms of Native Media

PRINT AND DIGITAL NEWS

Peggy Berryhill, of the Mvskoke tribe, is president of the Native Media Resources Center, a non-profit 501(C)(3). She owns and manages KGUA, in Gualala, California, one of the few independent radio stations in Indian Country. She broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and makes it a goal to air thoughtful programming to her audience and hosts a daily talk show. As a journalist with 45 years in media, Berryhill values critical thinking in news and opinion — journalism skills she would like to see more of in Native media. "We don't have an MSNBC, or *Washington Post*, BBC, *New York Times*, we don't have that quality of opinion thinking, which I think would be fantastic." [13]

Her nonprofit has a mission statement "to produce educational materials about Native Americans and indigenous communities in order to promote racial harmony and cross-cultural understanding." She credits some Native radio personalities for thoughtful commentary within their communities, but there needs to be more consistent voices. "Where are the opinion makers who are speaking to the larger issues?" she said.

A few consistent outlets that offer varied sources, informed reporting and critical thinking on current events include National Native News, Native America Calling — both entities of Koahnic Broadcasting — and Trahant Reports, Berryhill said. National Native News offers some five to 10 minutes of daily radio news relative to some four million American Indians in the United States, which is the only nationally broadcast daily newscast in the country. NPR stations in 29 states carry it.[14]

A major shift in the Native American media landscape was the announced closure of the Indian Country Today Media Network (ICTMN) in September 2017. Headquartered in New York City and owned by the Oneida Tribe of New York, ICTMN is the largest Native news organization in the U.S. Publisher Ray Halbritter attributed the closure to the same challenges that non-Native news organizations have faced. ICTMN, he said in the announcement, was operating "at an enormous—and unsustainable—financial loss." The closure was necessary to explore new partnerships and financial strategies for the network.[15]

"Who better than the Native journalists who know what's going on out there? We have a good feel for it, but we don't have a lot of time to always go out and do the investigative work that really should be done..."

—Levi Rickert, Native News Online

In October 2017, ICTMN was gifted to the National Congress for American Indians (NCAI), a tribal advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. In February 2018, NCAI announced that ICTMN would resume operations with Mark Trahant as editor. Trahant previously published Trahant Reports and produced a podcast for Native Voice One, the Native American Radio Network. ICTMN resumed publication in May 2018 along with a campaign to raise $100,000 in individual donations.[16]

In the Great Lakes region, Levi Rickert, of the Prairie Band Potawatomi, pushes ahead to fill his Native News Online website with fresh content seven days a week. He considers himself fortunate to live in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he has plenty of stories to report but regrets that time and budget constraints have made doing more of the substantive reporting- particularly investigative reporting- that he sees as necessary.

Collaborations with university interns or financial support from foundations would be helpful to improving Native journalism. "I feel really bad sometimes like I haven't really done a full job because I can't." Rickert does not have the capacity to write significant stories he sees being missed by the mainstream press. "Who better than the Native journalists who know what's going on out there?" he said. "We have a good feel for it, but we don't have a lot of time to always go and do the investigative work that really should be done with good journalistic principles."[17]

The importance of bringing Native perspectives to news is a common refrain among independent Native media makers. Berryhill said some things never change, such as the need to hear "our authentic voices." The ones that exist need more funding, she says. "I would really like to see much broader coverage of daily, or at least weekly coverage throughout Indian Country, on all these platforms that we can share with each other. But that gets back to infrastructure," she said. "How are you going to make this happen?" It's not a simple solution but a starting point would be a convening of media makers to find common ground, she said.[18]

LIMITED NATIONAL BROADCAST PRESENCE

American Indian journalist Harriet Skye died Jan. 20, 2018 at age 86. The Lakota woman from Standing Rock had hosted a television talk show starting in 1973 and was a broadcast innovator and trailblazer. She broke into the North Dakota broadcast market with her program, Indian Country Today. The show name was later taken by a South Dakota newspaper, *Indian Country Today*, which was later sold to the Oneida Tribe. It then became known as the Indian Country Today Media Network, the largest Native media news outlet in the United States.[19]

Skye became one of the first American Indian talk show hosts in the country, owing to a 1971 Federal Communication Commission mandate for media programming representation of minority viewpoints. Indian Country Today aired on KFYR, an NBC-affiliated station. She hosted about 250 episodes, most of which were recorded on 2-inch, reel-to-reel videotape. Producers used the same tape for each show, so only a few of the final episodes survived to be archived at the North Dakota State Historical Society. She was on the air twice a month and interviewed local, regional, and national leaders in the Meyer Broadcasting studio in Bismarck, North Dakota.[20]

Meanwhile, broadcasting advancement for U.S. minorities started to reverse. The FCC started to deregulate the airwaves in the 1980s. Deregulation policies posed three challenges to the achievement of minority representation: 1) discontinuation of face-to-face interviews between station personnel, 2) an increase in the discretion of individual broadcasters for coverages of issues of interest to minorities, and 3) shifting responsibility for public affairs programming on issues of importance to minorities to stations already serving minority audiences.[21]

In that context, Skye's program Indian Country Today proved to be a television rarity. For a brief moment in Native media, Skye made it seem natural for an American Indian woman to report and broadcast the news. Her death in 2018 was a bleak reminder about the near absence of American Indians on television. Berryhill said a number of people have tried and failed to establish a national broadcast network in the United States. "That hasn't happened, and it probably won't happen. It's also an amazingly expensive venture as so many people have found out."

However, Berryhill also notes that First Nations Experience (FNX) is making inroads with Native-driven programming in California and New Mexico.[22] FNX is the first broadcast television network in the United States devoted to American Indian content. The founding partners include the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians and the San Bernardino Community College District. FNX is owned by and originates from the studios of KVCR-PBS San Bernardino. FNX began broadcasting in the Los Angeles area Sept. 25, 2011, and went national Nov. 1, 2014 via the Public Television Interconnect System, making the network available to PBS affiliates, community and tribal stations, and cable television service providers across the country. FNX is now carried by 22 affiliate stations broadcasting into 14 states from Alaska to New York and is seen by more than 46 million households across the United States.[23]

Challenges for Native media

WORKING WITH LIMITED BUDGETS

Most independent native news outlets operate on very slim budgets, and funding in the space is limited. The dearth of funding for American Indian news operations is not lost on those paying attention. Steve Dubb recently wrote in *Nonprofit Quarterl*y:

> "Significant philanthropic resources to support independent journalism seem to be available. Yet mentions in the press of foundation support for American Indian journalism are conspicuous in their absence. Perhaps funders might want to consider investing more resources into making sure that American Indian voices can fully participate in the journalism field."[24]

Rickert of Native News Online represents a staff of one, requiring that he often work 12-hour days at least six days a week. He estimates that he does the work of three people and says he would pay others if he could afford it. "You almost have to ask people to do things for nothing right now and it's almost embarrassing to do that," he said. "It's just a struggle."[25]

For now, he takes pride in working hard and providing consistent news. His social media sites have 407,000 Facebook fans and 51,000 Twitter followers. He pays the bills by publishing the Tribal Business Journal magazine, and he is a paid consultant. He hasn't been able to sell digital advertising to potential business clients, even with millions of website page views. "When I talk about the possibility of getting advertising, they look at me like I'm a Martian," he said. Rickert believes it would be ideal if he could get advertising dollars from car dealers and cell phone providers who capitalize on the purchasing power of tribal governments.[26]

Berryhill, the station manager at KGUA in California, said it's a challenge to raise money for her noncommercial radio station. She brings in some earned income through events, such as salons. She receives some grants, but most philanthropic organizations typically do not fund general operating expenditures and also tend to fund larger nonprofits. The real struggle is covering overhead expenditures, and Berryhill herself does not get paid for her work. "I run this station pretty much on my own and have been for six years," said the self-proclaimed radio evangelist. "All I know is radio."[27]

In addition, KGUA doesn't receive funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) because eligibility requirements call for Berryhill to bring $300,000 in nonfederal funds to the table. If she had that type of income, she said she wouldn't need CPB funds.[28] Looking ahead, she sees a looming need for a pool of money for public television and radio equipment repairs since the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program (PTFP) was repealed, effective September 20, 2017. The program awarded upwards of $42 million in annual federal grants to help build facilities for tribes, nonprofit organizations, public broadcasting stations, state and local governments for the purpose of bringing educational and cultural programs to the public.[29] "It will be an extreme loss and it will have an extreme impact in the next few years," Berryhill said.[30]

Luckily, Indian Country was able to build a lot of radio stations before the PTFP program ended.[31] Native media operators who need equitable funding sources often must contend with matters deemed important to non-Indians, Berryhill said. Like other Native media operators, she experiences difficulty in finding advertisers and underwriters in a rural community.[32]

She said she recently started live-streaming after six years on the air, hoping to add revenue by attracting national or global advertisers. Keeping a radio station operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week is "an awesome task," she said, especially without tribal backing or by operating a large nonprofit.[33]

"It was our Indian people that needed an Indian newspaper, so we're trying to fill that void."

—Avis Little Eagle, Teton Times

Avis Little Eagle, Lakota, understands the rural-funding conundrum. She edits, reports, sells advertising, and recently took on the role of bookkeeper at the *Teton Times* on the Standing Rock Reservation. The newspaper serves readers who populate the 2.3 million-acre Standing Rock Reservation that straddles the North Dakota and South Dakota border. The paper does not have a website and depends on advertising and subscription sales, both of which have dropped. It's more difficult to sell newspapers, she said, when people don't want to buy a newspaper because they read Facebook, instead. "I don't think they discern what is real news and what is social media. It's like their light is blurred."[34]

Little Eagle represents a unique place in the Native media world in that she owns an independent newspaper. It's a lot easier to operate a newspaper if the tribe is paying the bills, especially in a rural area. She founded the *Teton Times* on the Standing Rock Reservation 16 years ago because the neighboring nonnative newspapers rarely covered news important to the Lakota community. "We try to get the Indian news out there," she said. "There was a niche to be filled. It was our Indian people that needed an Indian newspaper, so, we're trying to fill that void."[35]

Advertising sales dropped by about $8,000 in 2017, and Little Eagle can remember only one year she made a profit, and it was only about $800 dollars: "The paper consumes any profit that comes in." One morning in December 2017, she woke up exhausted. She had spent the previous evening at the adjacent Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation helping her paper's driver load the delivery truck, which broke down in freezing temperatures. A week later, the truck still wasn't repaired.[36]

James Morales, a citizen of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw in Oklahoma, publishes the *Native Hoop*, an independent online and print magazine. He chose publishing after he asked his uncle what he could to be a positive force in the community. His mission is to create a way for American Indians to be reflected in the news. His uncle suggested he create something — and give it away for free. Generosity is a gesture and cultural virtue of many tribes, but it does not pay the bills. "We just need everything," he said. "We're lucky if we make a dollar off each magazine that's sold."[37]

The magazine does not have a website or office, and his 30 writers, of all experience levels, are volunteers. The publication is primarily distributed to 27,000 Facebook followers. Despite this following, Morales believes having a website would help the publication's bottom line. "Every Native in the country is tied into Facebook," Morales said. "If we had started our

own website nine years ago, we probably would be doing a whole lot better than we're doing now." To earn revenue, he's considered everything from converting to a nonprofit to starting a thrift store, a model he sees working for the Salvation Army.[38]

Regardless of experience, it can be challenging to make a living wage as an independent reporter. Everything Mark Trahant writes, he lets others publish for free. He said he is able to publish Trahant Reports because he has a full-time university job, which he may quit[39] after becoming editor of *Indian Country Today* in May 2018.[40] He, like Morales and Rickert, has considered starting a nonprofit organization. "I think about how I'm fairly productive now and how much more I could be if I didn't have to worry about doing class lessons," he said. He's been publishing Trahant Reports for nine years, a blog he started after the Seattle Post Intelligencer, where he was an editor, closed operations.[41]

LIMITED PATHWAYS FOR NATIVE JOURNALISTS TO BUILD CAREERS

There are limited opportunities for aspiring journalists in Native communities. Tribal governments typically do not emphasize the need for independent press operations nor do they advocate for freedom of information, said Paul DeMain, editor of *News From Indian Country*. After more than 40 years in operation on the La Courte Oreilles Reservation in Wisconsin, the paper is one of the oldest independent newspapers in the country. He's hoping a young person who has a passion for newspapers will be willing to learn the business and take over when he retires.[42]

Unfortunately, journalism is not widely promoted as a career at tribal colleges. Of the 36 tribal colleges in the United States, Haskell University in Lawrence, Kansas, is the only known tribal college to offer a communication degree.[43]

"More tribes need to start communicating with their people even if it is a newsletter, and to make sure it is censorship-free to build trust," said Rhonda LeValdo, faculty member of the Media Communication program at Haskell University in Lawrence, Kansas. She said students should learn how to write and understand how to report, ask questions and "know how important freedom of press is." She said a healthy, competitive, independent newspaper environment exists with many of the reservations in South Dakota although they all face budget constraints.[44]

LeValdo, Acoma Pueblo, teaches a two-year multi-media program, including video production, news production, and digital photography. The goal is to get students to complete their bachelor's degree at a journalism school. As the only faculty member in her department, she believes one reason there is a lack of tribal college multimedia programs stacks up to a lack of funding. In addition, written expression has not been a dominant part of traditionally oratory Native cultures. "I think writing skills scare some of our people," she said. "They don't think they can. They are also shy. They aren't the ones to reach out. We just have to give them a push."[45]

Trahant said more needs to be done to make journalism appealing to Native youths. He said he didn't have any Native journalism students at the University of North Dakota where he taught. "I don't think we've done enough to sell the craft. You look at Canada and you've got at least two universities with full Native journalism programs, one in British Columbia, and one in Ontario. And I don't think right now we have really anything close."[46]

Bryan Pollard of the NAJA said the organization is in the early stages of developing several solutions to improve the state of tribal media and Native journalism. "Where we still fall short, but have made gains recently, is in developing consistent partnerships and funding sources that we can build organizational capacity on. Once we have the financial foundation to increase staffing and internal professionalism, our program ideas will be able to flourish, and our reach will dramatically expand."[47]

NAJA has a number of needs including long-term funding support of 5 to 10-year commitments, funding commitments for administrative support, and funding for specific programmatic partnerships. Pollard cites the NAJA's Native American Journalism Fellowship as a good example. "This is a tremendous and well-organized program that directly impacts the number of Native journalists in tribal and mainstream media. It is a primary vehicle for ensuring that our Native voice is represented in newsrooms across the country, and yet we struggle to keep is funded from year to year. The Native American Journalism Fellowship must be fully funded in order for us to sustain and expand our professional ranks in the industry."[48]

"Of the 36 tribal colleges in the United States, Haskell University in Lawrence, Kansas, is the only known tribal college to offer a communication degree."

Andi Murphy, Navajo, credits a joint journalism training program of the Freedom Forum and the University of South Dakota for igniting her passion in journalism. "Before journalism, I was an English major and I wanted to be an author and write books." But then she came across a scholarship from the Native American Journalists Association, which had a caveat. She would have to attend the American Indian Journalism Institute, (AIJI), the journalism boot camp that would first expose her to a potential career in journalism. She soon changed her major and earned her journalism degree. She now works as a producer for Native America Calling in Albuquerque, N.M.[49]

The AIJI summer boot camp was first hosted at USD in 2001. When the Freedom Forum foundation, which started with a $1 billion endowment, started scaling back operations, it cut the Native journalism program in 2014.[50] With fewer Native students in the journalism pipeline, Trahant said he feels he has little influence on upcoming Native journalists. "I think about my career and how much mentoring I had from folks like Richard LaCourse and Rose Robinson, and I just don't see that. I was doing it much more probably ten years ago than I am now."[51]

Others have looked beyond tribal colleges to train journalists. Sitting Bull College at Standing Rock does not have a journalism program. So, to address the shortage of skilled reporters in the community, Little Eagle had a brief — and much appreciated — time period where a local high school teacher worked with students to write stories for the *Teton Times*.[52]

Rickert suggests community journalism training be offered to Native communities given the proliferation of smartphones. The protests at Standing Rock prove a need, he said. Although live feeds from smartphones provided a much needed on-the-ground perspective, a lot of people started calling themselves journalists but lacked journalistic guidelines.[53]

TRIBAL PRESS FREEDOM

Nearly two centuries after the *Cherokee Phoenix* began, many tribes still publish newspapers, and tribal governments are one of the key challenges facing Native media. Those papers largely promote the tribe's messages rather than serving a watchdog role that holds tribal governments accountable to the community. American Indian reporters and the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), have recognized the shortcomings of tribe-owned media for decades, engaging in multiple campaigns for press freedom on reserves.[54]

It may be no small wonder that tribes still feel the need to engage in advocacy journalism as Native sovereignty over tribal lands is still under threat. For example, in 2017, a concurrent resolution was introduced in the North Dakota state legislature to urge Congress to amend the Indian reservation system so that states would be responsible for engagement with tribal governments instead of the United States federal government.[55] The need of tribal media to fill an advocacy role has left a dark hole devoid of news coverage leaving tribe-owned media journalists typically unable to serve the people by holding tribal government leaders accountable to the communities they serve.

The *Cherokee Phoenix*, and subsequent reincarnations of the paper, typically "functioned more as strategically designed advocacy media for their founders, than as news vehicles," employing tactics recognized as part of public relations practices today.[56] On the other hand, tribes like the Cherokee and Osage also serve as models in the 21st Century for amendments to tribal constitutions to protect freedom of the press.[57]

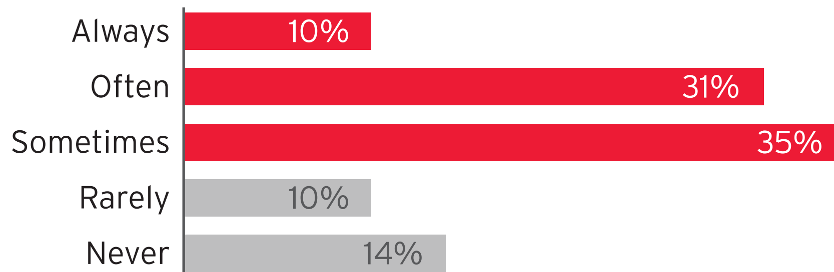
Free and independent media is critical to the well-being of communities and to the participation of individuals in political processes affecting them. Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, has written:

> "Independent media of one form or another has played a critical role in many of the seminal events of the last half-century: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the restoration of democracy in Latin America, the economic transformation of Asia and recent Arab uprisings. But in today's globalized, interconnected world, free and unfettered information is more essential than ever. It's essential for markets and for trade.
>
> "And it's essential to empowering the emerging community of global citizens and ensuring that they are able to participate in a meaningful way in the decisions that affect their lives. Likewise, those who are deprived of information are essentially disempowered. We live in a world in which the abundance of information obscures the enormous gaps in our knowledge created by violence, repression and state censorship ensuring that news and information circulate freely throughout societies and across borders is the challenge of our time."[58]

Independent Native media needs a chance to flourish and grow, which requires stepping outside the shadow of tribe-controlled media. To that end, NAJA announced the RED Press Initiative to research and report on journalistic freedoms in Indian Country in August 2018.[59]

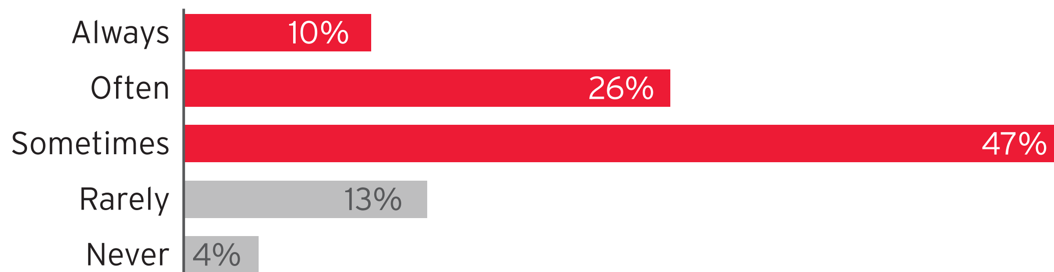
A yet-to-be-published, preliminary survey conducted as part of the initiative in summer 2018 found that the majority of tribal media is controlled by tribal governments either through tribal ownership of businesses or organizations with the largest proportion, 40%, of tribal media being a department within tribal government. Some open-ended responses indicated that while many tribes have freedom of press in their tribal constitutions, many tribes are able to control publication of news not through restraint but through the relationship between media and tribal press secretaries or by acting as the final editor for publications.[60]

Tribal media content is often determined by government interests.
Percent saying that content is determined by tribal governments:



Further, seventy-six percent of tribal media indicate that their content is always, frequently, or sometimes determined by tribal government officials or interests, and 83 percent say tribal media journalists are always, frequently, or sometimes intimidated when covering tribal affairs.[61]

Tribal journalists are often subjected to intimidation and harassment when covering tribal affairs.
Percent saying that journalists are intimidated or harassed:



Summary and Recommendations

Communities around the globe share an inherent need to be informed. American Indians are no different in their need for real-time sources of news to bolster critical thinking and informed discussions about news and events affecting their communities. More opportunities, however, must be created to support independent Native American media operations and journalists. Ideally, this will unfold in key areas such as increasing general operating budgets for media outlets, intensifying efforts to multiply the number of skilled journalists, promoting independent media operations, campaign for freedom of the press, and opening the door to a national broadcast presence of U.S. indigenous people.

Below is an overview of the state of Native media. Currently, there are no publicly available lists of Native media nor readily available data about Native media. Figures provided below for 2017 and 2018 represent an analysis conducted by the Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance using media lists from Mark Trahant and the Native American Journalists Association.

- Tribes own and mostly control 72 percent of all Native print and radio operations in the United States.[62]
- In 1998, there were 100 magazines serving Indian Country.[63] Today, there are approximately eight magazines in the United States.[64]
- Today, there are 54 urban and reservation newspapers and 24 newsletters,[65] compared to 280 reservation newspapers and bulletins and 320 urban Indian publications in 1998.[66]
- The number of radio stations serving Indian Country has nearly doubled from 30 stations in 1998[67] to 59 stations in 2017.[68] This growth is the bright spot in the field — making radio the largest means of communication for reservations.

TO ENSURE THE VITAL GROWTH OF JOURNALISM IN INDIAN COUNTRY, THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS ARE NECESSARY:

- Collaboration on stories between mainstream newspaper reporters and Native journalists to bolster each other's work. This will provide inroads for nonnative journalists to better understand indigenous communities. In addition, it helps provides guidance and resources for Native journalists working at smaller newspapers.
- Development of a multimedia platform for Native journalists to share news stories with other journalists and media outlets. Native journalists are doing a lot of good work, so there should be a way to distribute it as well as a way for mainstream news outlets to share their content with smaller Native news outlets.
- Creation of fellowships for Native journalists and Native students through foundation support and through collaboration with other newspapers.

- Establishment of Native-based journalism programs at the tribal college level or mainstream university. A primary goal is recruit Native students into the field of journalism. A major pipeline dried up when the Freedom Forum ended the American Indian Journalism Institute.
- Improvement of business models to increase revenue streams for large and small newsrooms so Native-focused newsrooms no longer have to rely on tribes to fund their operations
- Overhead funding for general support of Native media organizations and independent media outlets. It is becoming more difficult for independent operations to rely on advertising, which many publishers once relied on. Foundations tend to overlook Native media. "Significant philanthropic resources to support independent journalism seem to be available. Yet mentions in the press of foundation support for American Indian journalism are conspicuous in their absence." wrote Steve Dubb in the Nonprofit Quarterly.
- Implementation of training and updates on media technology.
- Engagement with Native communities on the meaning and importance of freedom of the press and freedom of information. This also means taking steps to enshrine independent press acts in tribal constitutions. Independent tribal media needs the force of constitutional law, in much the same way the First Amendment is guiding force for democracy and transparency for U.S. media and citizens.

As Bryan Pollard of NAJA reminds us, it is time to flip the script and make independent media in Indian Country normal rather than an exception:

> "In order for tribal media to remain and increase sustainability and relevance, I believe that there must be policy solutions applied to ensure independence. There are a handful of tribal media outlets that have Independent Press Acts to protect them from political forces and undue political influence. While these acts are not a panacea, they are certainly a benefit to the quality of reporting at those tribes and the evidence is empirical. Indian Country needs to build and improve upon those successes."[69]

The Indigenous Media Freedom Alliance has a mission to promote the growth of independent media that includes a media literacy campaign.[70] As a growing number of tribes participate in constitutional reform movement, there must forums to engage tribal citizens on the merits of a free and independent press. Greater engagement with and inclusion of tribal citizens is key to ensuring the growth of Native indepdendent media.

Endnotes

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