



## Native radio: at the heart of public radio's mission

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**Commentary by Bruce Theriault and Felice Tilin**

Ride the school bus on the Hopi Reservation in northern Arizona and you'll hear *Shooting Stars*, a program for kids produced mostly by volunteers at KUYI, the three-year-old public radio station on the reservation. Tune in during the day and you'll hear an update on living with diabetes or asthma. Keep listening and you'll hear junior- and senior-high school interns reading the news. Stop to chat with someone on the reservation about what they've heard on the radio. Everyone knows you're talking about the same station.

KUYI's call letters stand for "water" — a precious resource in the desert country. It's an appropriate metaphor, not only for this station but also for Native public radio in general. Despite substantial challenges, Native radio is providing essential, soul-sustaining and sometimes literally lifesaving programming to Native communities across the Southwest, the northern Plains, California and Alaska.

Last summer and fall we took an extended road trip through Indian Country, the common Native American term for the widely spaced reservations and other

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tribal homelands. We went on behalf of CPB to assess how it could invest most effectively in continuing Native radio's growth and development. We visited 15 stations from Alaska to Arizona to Wisconsin, met with AIROS (American Indian Radio On Satellite) and Koahnic Broadcasting Corp. leaders, and conducted financial and operational analyses of Native radio. Joined on most visits by Vinnie Curren, CPB senior v.p. for radio, we spoke with station and community leaders about the needs, aspirations, challenges and opportunities facing Native American public radio stations, producers and national organizations.

We found stations that are genuinely indispensable to their communities and profoundly local, but they face chronic and sometimes exasperating challenges. They are nevertheless on the cusp of becoming a coordinated system. We believe that — with continued investment and creative thinking about generating and sharing resources — Native radio will succeed in taking that important step.

**“The community would be lost without this station”**

We were struck again and again by the deep connections between Native stations and the communities they serve. Partly because of its origins in grassroots activism and partly because it serves widely dispersed Native Americans with very few resources, radio on reservations is both indispensable and local in ways that go to the heart of public radio's vision and mission.

Because they serve communities with chronic health problems and limited medical services, for example, some stations offer call-in programs that let listeners talk with health providers about issues of life, death and disability, such as diabetes, addiction and cancer. Often located where weather is extreme, the stations regularly broadcast crucial information about road closings, storms, fires and floods. They act as important vehicles for distributing community information.

“KYUK, Bethel, Alaska, broadcasts regular personal messages on the air—in the dead of winter,” we were told by General Manager Ron Daugherty. “You know that Aunt Mabel is stuck and we're bringing her supplies—or So-and-So is coming out to you, [so] be on the lookout for them. . . . In ‘bush’ Alaska [or on reservations], radio can be the only way to give out information — like the vet is going to be here and is setting up next to such-and-such trailer.”

### **Where are the stations?**

Check [the list of 32 stations](#) in the Pacific Northwest, Southwest, Plains states and Alaska.

At both the local and national levels, Native radio makes it possible for Native Americans to tell their own story from their own point of view. Koahnic's *Native America Calling*, carried live by virtually all Native stations, and similar shows become forums for discussion of vital issues. As we crossed the Pine Ridge

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Reservation in South Dakota to visit KILI, we heard NAC callers from all over the country discuss the lack of health care for the majority of Native Americans — those who live off the reservations and do not have access to the Indian Health Service.

#### **Driving force: cultural preservation**

Mainstream public radio often wrestles with how to bring more diverse and underrepresented voices to the air. This is the compelling, important daily work of Native radio: presenting and preserving the voices, ideas, language and culture of Native people. One station staff member told us about a Native station that signs on every morning with the traditional singing of the tribal callers. Those callers were the original Native radio, standing high in the village, singing the news to everyone. “I grew up hearing this,” the staff member said, “and when I hear the station play this music, it brings me home.”

Native stations’ biggest challenge is their lack of resources. As one station representative told us, scarcity is a constant for most Native stations. Located in communities with few local businesses and plagued by unemployment that routinely exceeds 50 percent, Native stations generally have no success with pledge drives, underwriting and other traditional public radio means of support. Of the total community financial support brought in by 32 Native stations, seven stations raise 93 percent. For most, we were told, \$1,500 would be a big fund drive.

The stations look to alternative sources of financial and in-kind support. Many receive substantial in-kind support from tribes, but most don’t receive significant amounts of direct funding. The exception are Alaska Native stations, which receive annual operating grants from the state. Other nontraditional contributions benefit some stations. KABU in St. Michaels, N.D., for example, is moving into a new broadcast facility built for it at no cost as part of an expansion of the tribe-owned casino.

To hold costs down, many stations rely heavily on volunteers but are still confronted with basic logistical challenges that would be foreign to most mainstream public radio stations. In one case, for example, some of the volunteers hitchhike the 60-mile round trip to the station because they don’t have cars. Station managers often resort to “workarounds,” learning to cope with a technical breakdown because no one has the right part or the knowledge to fix it, or make do without an available grant payment because no one has the time or expertise to file the required financial reports.

A lack of training is also an ongoing struggle for Native public radio. Many station leaders are incredibly committed people who came to Native radio through their commitment to social or educational issues, but they often have only minimal training in management, fundraising, technical issues or program production.

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Trained Native journalists are scarce — only 0.003 percent of American journalists are Native.

While CPB invested heavily in training for the public radio system years ago, Native radio in general did not benefit from that investment. Without money to pay for training, managers do what they can with what they've got. "I hold classes once a week," one station leader told us. "I am not a great teacher, but it is necessary."

Station staffs also work with social problems common to many reservation communities, including depression, alcoholism and lack of education.

In this environment of scarce resources, many Native stations must focus on short-term goals — staying up and running this week — while longer-term goals and capacity-building efforts wait.

The satellite system for Native radio, AIROS, likewise operates with limited resources. "Look at us — we are really two guys and a satellite channel," a staff member told us. "We've put together a 24-hour signal and we're trying to provide programming with a really limited budget — trying to do what other operations are doing but with a fraction of the budget."

Even so, we feel optimistic about Native Radio's vitality and long-term future. Many hard-working, dedicated people are making amazing things happen — presenting community voices, culture and language. Several Native stations own their own facilities, have decent modern equipment, and are producing amazing local programming in both English and Native languages. The stations stay in close touch with community needs and make extra efforts to present programming accessible to all. For example, KTDB in Pine Hill, N.M., translates 18 hourly NPR newscasts into Navajo — an enormous achievement considering that the station has a full-time staff of only five.

We believe that Native Radio, by working as a system, can leverage new revenues from traditional and nontraditional sources. Even a relatively modest return of \$3 million to \$5 million would make an enormous difference to the Native radio system, and we think revenues in that range would be quite plausible.

**"Partnerships are key to our survival"**

Despite some daunting challenges, the dreams that spurred the birth and growth of Native radio are still very much alive. Its early growth, like that of many mainstream public radio stations, was largely unplanned. Now its leaders increasingly see themselves as part of a system of Native stations, who can work together, share resources and give their people a platform of their own for years to come.

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Three key factors enabled Native radio to reach this critical turning point:

- CPB's funding for national programming—primarily Koahnic's *Native America Calling* and *National Native News* and AIROS;
- NPR Distribution's decision to extend the AIROS contract for a free full-time satellite channel, connecting stations and enabling them to stay on air longer by broadcasting segments of the 24-hour AIROS program service; and
- the CPB-funded 2001 Native Radio Summit, which played a transformative role in building a sense of community among Native stations.

As we spoke with station leaders about their hopes for Native radio's future, we heard many of the same themes again and again:

"Native stations are different and at different stages of development." Native radio emerged in a distinct cultural environment and is fundamentally different from mainstream public radio. It relies on different assumptions, needs alternative business models and measures success by different values. That said, Native radio would benefit from the creative use of conventional tools such as strategic plans, fundraising plans, financial analyses, business management techniques and grants. It needs, but does not currently have, the resources to support trained people who can lead this work.

**"Partnerships are key to our survival"**

Native stations and, for that matter, non-Native stations can benefit enormously from innovative partnerships. Some stations already have created collaborations that can and should serve as models for others around the country. For instance, the Indian Country News Bureau, jointly launched by KUYI and KNAU in Flagstaff, Ariz., supports an experienced newspaper person who works with reporters in Indian Country to produce coverage of Native issues for broadcast by both stations, reaching a broad Native and non-Native audience.

"We need someone whose job it is to follow up." Native radio urgently needs to find sustainable ways to coordinate the stations' work and collective resources. An essential part of becoming a system is thinking like one—regularly sharing ideas, finding ways to raise money jointly and helping each other solve problems. Only by thinking, communicating and working as a system will the stations be able to aggregate limited resources and advance shared goals.

**With future generations in mind**

Bringing water to dry lands, reporting to people about the issues that directly affect their lives, helping people learn more about and function better in the world — this is what public radio's public service is about. Native radio is coming of age. It is highly valued by the communities it serves and is increasingly ready to

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plan for the future. Its stations still struggle with isolation and chronic resource shortages, but they're moving toward becoming a coherent system. As Native radio moves forward, increasingly functioning as a system or network, it can bring nourishing water to public radio as a whole and to its own communities.

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**Photo by Bruce Theriault.**

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Native-controlled Koahnic Broadcasting Corp., Anchorage. Live stream of [Koahnic's Anchorage station](#), KNBA.

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