

Indigenous Audio-Visual Media Production and Broadcasting – Canadian Examples

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Introduction

This is a short position paper that sets out to briefly discuss how indigenous audio-visual media production and broadcasting initiatives have been developed and maintained in Canada. I am concentrating on television which still is the world's dominant audio-visual communication medium. What are the specifics of indigenous media (production) and related practices and processes? And what does the future hold for indigenous media projects? Due to limited time at hand, I am only able to open this field of research by presenting two case studies: the national Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) (e.g., Hafsteinsson 2013, Roth 2005) and Wawatay (e.g., Budka 2009, Minore & Hill 1990), a regional communication society in Northern Ontario.

Indigenous People(s) and Media

The question who is “indigenous” and who is not, is old and heatedly debated (e.g. Kuper 2003 and related discussions in *Current Anthropology*). According to Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart (2008a) neither the definition of “indigenous (people)” nor of related concepts such as “indigeneity” and “indigenism” is an easy one, without conflicts, constraints, and even contradictions. The same, of course, goes for “indigenous media”. Who is classified as “indigenous people(s)” was for a long time dictated by “western”, non-indigenous and colonizing powers and agents. In some nation-states this is still the case today.

Indigenous self-determination “as the necessary response to the legacy of colonization and the only means to ensure the survival of Indigenous peoples” is at the centre of this definitional problem and the fundamental criterion for the creation of a (working) definition (Wilson & Stewart 2008a: 8). There is, however, no inclusive or comprehensive definition of indigenous people that can be applied to all of the world's regions. Strict, static, or essentialist definitions and categorizations are generally refused by most indigenous representatives. Wilson and Stewart (2008a: 14) suggest four points of reference to understand and identify who is “indigenous (people)”: (1) priority in time of occupying and utilizing a particular territory and its resources; (2) cultural distinctiveness, including language, religion, social organization, etc.; (3) self-identification and recognition by other groups and entities as a distinct group or collectivity; (4) experience of marginalization, dispossession, and exclusion.

The past decades saw a worldwide increase of indigenous activism which has been centring around land claims, language and human rights, education and “the rights of indigenous peoples to speak for and represent themselves as opposed to being 'spoken for' by nonindigenous experts,

bureaucrats, and policymakers” (de la Cadena & Starn 2007: 10). Media technologies, the control over their production and distribution, play an important role in the representation and articulation of indigenous people.

It is therefore not surprising that in the field of media and visual anthropology, anthropologists are interested in how indigenous people have started to talk back to structures of power that neglect their political, sociocultural, and economic needs and interests by producing and distributing their own media and media content (e.g., Ginsburg 1991, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Michaels 1985, 1994; Prins 2002; Turner 1992, 2002).¹ To “underscore the sense of both political agency and cultural intervention that people bring to these efforts”, Faye Ginsburg (2002a: 8, 1997) refers to these media practices as “cultural activism”. “Indigenized” media technologies provide indigenous people with the possibility to make their voices heard, to network and connect, to distribute information, to revitalize culture and language, and to become politically engaged and active (Ginsburg 2002a, 2002b).

As one part of a wider set of sociocultural and political practices, indigenous media practices, such as the production of TV programs, videos, films, or websites, are closely connected to the mediation of culture and the construction of (collective) identities (Ginsburg 2002b). Indigenous media thus contribute to the reflection and the transformation of the conditions of indigenous lives (Ginsburg 2002a). Ginsburg (2002b: 217) underlines her “media activism” approach by arguing that “when other forms are no longer effective, indigenous media offers a possible means – social, cultural, and political – for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographical, and economic disruption”. The mediation and (re-)construction of culture and identity through “modern” media technologies also include cultural elements and characteristics of the dominant, non-indigenous societies which are recombined with indigenous, “traditional” elements. The “indigenous media as cultural activism” perspective therefore proposes an open and dynamic understanding of culture and “the cultural”.

Indigenous Audiovisual Media Production and Broadcasting – Canadian Examples

Canada's Aboriginal Peoples	First Nations (North American Indian) Métis (mix of Indian & European ancestry) Inuit 1,4 m. (2011) 4.3% of total Canadian pop. 61% First Nations
Ontario	201.100 First Nation members
Northwestern Ontario	45.000 people in region of size of France Ojibwa, Ojicree & Cree speaking First Nations remote fly-in communities with reserve status
Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN)	Treaties 9 & 5 49 First Nation communities (100 – 2.000 residents)

(Statistics Canada 2013)

1 For recent discussions of the history, the development, and the implications of indigenous media see also Alia (2010), Cardús i Font (2014), Hafsteinsson (2013), Wilson and Stewart (2008b).

When there was the Biafra famine back in the 1980s, the First Nation community of Sandy Lake in Northwestern Ontario was raising money to support the aid agencies which helped the starving people. To raise these funds, the women of the community went to the communication centre where they switched off the TV transmitter from the Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation (CBC). They did this just before *Hockey Night in Canada* was on – one of the most popular TV events, particularly among the community's male residents. After shutting off the transmitter, the women went on community radio and announced that they wouldn't turn the transmitter back on until the men had donated a certain amount of money. The following Monday, the Sandy Lake men shut off the TV transmitter in the communication centre just before the soap opera *All My Children*, which was particularly watched by the women of the community, was on air. This time they announced that they wouldn't put the program back on until the women had given money. Even though the technical equipment for receiving TV signals did not belong to the community – it was the property of the CBC – people appropriated it for their own, very special, purpose.

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(Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) map, <http://www.nan.on.ca>)

While larger indigenous communities had already access to satellite TV in the 1980s, indigenous TV networks and programming were only in their infancy, particularly on the national level. This changed during the 1990s when the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) began operating as the world's first nation-wide indigenous TV broadcaster in 1999. Lorna Roth (2010) identifies six, overlapping phases in the history of APTN each marked by distinct changes in representation practices and infrastructure developments. APTN's history is, of course, closely related to the history of indigenous TV broadcasting and media and communication policy making in Canada.

The first phase (1900s-1970) preceded the introduction of television in the Canadian North and was dominated by stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people in the non-indigenous media. In the second phase (1968-1981) indigenous people realized the potential of televisual media as empowering tools for their own agenda. During this phase Canada launched the first domestic communication satellite which provided the larger northern communities (“CBC communities”) with access to television. In phase three (1978-1991) the first television experiments in indigenous communities resulted in the licensing of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. At the same time the Canadian broadcasting policy was reshaped. In a fourth phase (1983-1992) the broadcasting infrastructure was consolidated and expanded. And in 1983 the Northern Broadcasting Policy was announced which “recognized the importance of Native participation in both media programming and the regulatory process” (Roth 2010: 20).

In phase five (1986-1999) indigenous communication societies began to produce programs for a nationwide audience. After the amendment of the Broadcasting Act in 1991, the broadcasting license for Television Northern Canada (TVNC) was approved. In 1992, TVNC began broadcasting as the world's first indigenous television network with “a high volume of programming from indigenous sources” (Roth 2010: 22). This was also the beginning of the sixth phase (1992-1997) which finally resulted in the launch of APTN as nationwide indigenous television network in 1999. Since then, APTN proved itself as a valuable media network providing information from the heart of Aboriginal Canada to native and non-native audiences. “Despite its complex and challenging program mandate to serve all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, North and South, the network has engaged with its constituency groups well in that it has northernized and indigenized Canadian programming” (Roth 2010: 32).

In his recent work on APTN's communicative and journalistic practices, Sigurjon Baldur Hafsteinsson (2013: 11) criticizes that research about indigenous media “largely ignored questions proposed by indigenous peoples themselves”. Research has rather focused on the conceptualization of indigenous media in relation to and through “Western” notions. In his attempt to understand “the importance of media *of* indigenous social and spatial relations”, Hafsteinsson (2013: 11) follows Eric Michaels' (e.g., 1985) approach of considering media's cultural, societal, and linguistic particularities and limitations as well as the sociocultural rules, norms, and regulations of knowledge and information production and circulation in an indigenous context. That is, Hafsteinsson advocates indigenous people's own articulations of media practices. Building on Arjun Appadurai's concept of “deep democracy”, he understands indigenous media practices as basically democratic practices of “inclusion and participation” (Hafsteinsson 2013: 66-68). “Democracy”, further, needs to be understood in this context as an “emerging narrative field” rather than as a political concept (Hafsteinsson 2013: 68).

APTN, as an indigenous owned and controlled, national TV network and broadcaster, has to consider the cultural diversity of Canada's indigenous peoples and the network's indigenous and non-indigenous audiences alike. Its mandate also includes the bridging between indigenous and non-indigenous people, that is a translation between cultures. For Hafsteinsson (2013), APTN is therefore an example of “deep democracy”.

Another organization that pioneered in the production of indigenous media technologies, communication networks, and media content is the Wawatay Native Communication Society that provides the approximately 45.000 First Nation people of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which covers

most of Northern Ontario, with newspapers, radio and TV programs as well as online news.

During the 1970s, several Aboriginal newspapers and newsletters came into existence across Canada following the release of the White Paper on Indian policy by the Canadian government (cf. Demay 1993). In Northern Ontario Wawatay published a bilingual Newsletter for the first time in 1972. This newsletter eventually developed into *Wawatay News* which provided the First Nations of the region with news in English and Oji-Cree. Following the launch of the Anik satellites at the end of the 1970s several Aboriginal broadcasters, such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation started to provide Native-language programming (cf. Baltruschat 2004; Roth 2005). The Northern Broadcasting Policy and the Northern Native Broadcast Program created the basis for a northern satellite distribution system in the 1980s, which eventually resulted in the launch of Television Northern Canada (TVNC) which again resulted in the creation of APTN. APTN, as national TV network, has been dependent on content from local and regional Aboriginal media producers, such as Wawatay.

Wawatay Television produced programs such as *Wawatay Kids TV*, which was a series for children between 4 and 10 years of age. The episodes provided introductory lessons on the Ojibwa language, simple life lessons, wilderness teachings, and it promoted oral teachings through the retelling of legends. About 10% of *Wawatay Kids TV* content was Ojibwa. In the program *Cry of the Loon Fishing Adventures* traditional fishing techniques were explored and presented from an indigenous perspective. 50% of the show *Wawatay Presents Shoomis' Legends*, where a youth audience was introduced to native legends and technical skills such as building a birch bark canoe, was in the Oji-Cree language.

After Wawatay's first television program went on air in 1987, the communication society had to suspend its TV program due to management and financial problems in 2014. The Thunder Bay office had to close, staff was laid off, and the whole organization had to undergo a restructuring process. This process resulted in a new management and the saving of the radio service in 2015. If TV and newspaper will be able to take up their work again remains to be seen.

Wawatay's situation has been particularly severe because the communication society is not only producing media content and providing local communication infrastructure, its mandate is also to preserve Aboriginal culture and language:

Wawatay Native Communications Society is a self-governing, independent community-driven entrepreneurial native organization dedicated to using appropriate technologies to meet the communication needs of people of Aboriginal ancestry in Northern Ontario, wherever they live. In doing so, its founders intended that Wawatay would serve their communities by preserving, maintaining and enhancing indigenous languages and culture. (Wawatay 2008)

Conclusion

Indigenous peoples, organizations, and initiatives have been producing their own audio-visual media (representations) for decades. The reasons for doing so are manifold, but can be centred around two factors. (1) Endeavours to make indigenous, often marginalized, voices heard, from the local and the regional to the global level, for indigenous and non-indigenous audiences. These endeavours also include the promotion and preservation of indigenous cultures and languages. (2)

Efforts to contribute on their own terms to the mainstream media landscape dominated by non-indigenous media. To be excluded from this “mediascape” means also to be eliminated from the (communicative) public sphere and related sociocultural, political, and economic processes. In the indigenous context, the production and distribution of media (content) is therefore closely linked to political agency, self-determination, and cultural activism.

Indigenous media producers are “engaged in a powerful new process of constructing identities on their own terms but in ways that address the relationships between indigenous histories and cultures and the encompassing societies in which they live” (Ginsburg 2002a: 213).

By concentrating on the actual conditions and life worlds of indigenous people in Canada, both APTN and Wawatay have been trying to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate alternatives to mainstream mass media. Within the processes and practices of media technology production, authorship as a “cultural principle” allows media producers to negotiate and challenge authority, ownership, and control over media technologies and their content (Peterson 2003: 193). But control and ownership of media is limited in respect to funding and maintenance. Both indigenous media producers have been dependent on non-indigenous funders such as governmental institutions and organizations. But while APTN managed to become a highly successful national TV network, globally exporting its programs, Wawatay almost crashed completely because of yearlong mismanagement.

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