

From Village Halls to a New Network of Knowledge

Growing the Native American Audience

By Loris Ann Taylor
with contributions from Mark Minkler

SRG asked Loris Ann Taylor, Executive Director of Native Public Media, to think long-haul – to outline her conceptual framework as she builds radio services for Native American audiences in 2020. As she prepared this piece, Loris drew from two colleagues – Peter Shane, author of "Democratic Information Societies" and Mark Minkler, a Hopi college student and music producer, who brings the perspective of a digital native.

Some years ago, I returned home to the remote Hopi Reservation in northern Arizona. I had spent many years away from my family and community. With high hopes of using my western education to make life better for my own people, I planned and schemed about how I would bring the first “village hall” to the Hopi people so that we could discuss and do something about the challenging problems we faced. After weeks of meticulous research on the best town hall practices, I settled on a model borrowed from a Governor’s town hall – a conference room, recorders, facilitators, post briefings and official reports.

Eager to get the planning underway and armed with elaborate charts and graphs, I presented my findings to the Hopi village residents who would host the first “village hall.” Speaking to a room full of elders, parents and young people, I described the process in detail, excited by the anticipation that my idea of a village hall would be embraced. At the end of my presentation, an elderly woman at the back of the room raised her hand.

Not quite asking, she said, “I am wondering if our first village hall can be Tuesday night at the community building. It’s when we meet to quilt. We can invite the men and young people to come.”

The idea of using “natural” community gatherings as a forum never entered my mind when I was researching town halls. It was a brilliant suggestion and has been the model for our “village halls” ever since.

Even a home-girl can get it wrong in a hype-ridden world. The lesson I learned from that experience is that social change begins with community awareness; an awareness that includes listening to and truly understanding our diverse communities. It is not a prescriptive approach but rather a coming together of stakeholders having a collective vision and a determination to chart their own destiny. In Public Service Media, we are those stakeholders and it is our collective vision that will guide how we determine our media destiny in a manner true to the principles of democracy and open access to knowledge and information.

“A great network for knowledge” as President Lyndon Johnson described public broadcasting, is a high stake proposition that comes with risk. A network for a new America challenges traditional broadcast models and questions current market driven models and scales of economy. To bring about the paradigm shift we seek, those of us who are privileged enough to work in Public Service Media must understand that we are ambassadors on a mission to reach out to audiences often considered too small, too unique, too “ethnic,” and too diverse. If our Public Service Media is to achieve sustained relevance in the future, we must move away from the usual and customary models and toward new ways of reaching, holding and transforming our audiences. As such, it is no longer a question of wanting in – we are already in – it is instead a question of how to achieve these goals.

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Public Service Media and Native Americans

In this country, the Hopi, Iroquois, Seneca, Zuni, Sioux, Tlingits, Tohono Od’ham and the 500 plus Native Nations spread across America are as diverse from one another as they are complex in cultural traditions and heritage. Through our work at Native Public Media, these many nations provide an opportunity to begin understanding why local Native-owned stations are essential community institutions vitally significant to the nation building of tribes; and how non-Native-owned mainstream stations can reach out to Native American and other ethnic audiences across the country.

Throughout history, the drive of dominant cultures toward cultural homogenization and the desire of Native people to maintain their social diversification have been two competing processes that have influenced Native American culture and identity. Facilitated by an ever-expanding and increasingly available media, Native people have witnessed and often participated in the shaping of Native American identity in a media saturated world controlled by a non-Native majority.

Contact with technological innovations has always produced internal tribal debate about whether to accept them. In my own village of Oraibi, the acceptance of paved roads, electricity, and modern plumbing, for example, was not a debate over an improved quality of life, but rather a debate about whether it was an endorsement of western technology which would in turn encourage a demand for ever larger doses of western material culture: a dominant culture that has demonstrated a powerful ability to diffuse Native identities and homogenize diverse, vibrant cultures into a national brand of “American” culture.

In a mediated world, the diffusion of diversity comes about relatively seamlessly and unnoticed – and, sadly, is an accepted practice of some current media institutions. Electronic media (terrestrial radio and new media) in all its glorious ability to connect people also has a disconnecting edge and can marginalize entire groups of people if their

inclusion is nothing more than a sidebar. The powerful mediums of media can create virtual cultures, manipulate time and place, blur the lines between what we have previously considered private and public, separate traditional links between physical and social places, allow people to escape using information from place-defined groups, permit “outsiders” to invade the space of many groups without physically entering them and even make producers out of ordinary citizens.

Capturing the Power of New Technology

Mark Minkler, a Hopi college student and music producer recently said to me:

“Cutting edge technology has created a renaissance in electronic media. Products such as Pro Tools, Final Cut Pro, Adobe photoshop and other various software has enabled the general society to venture into the realm of electronic arts without the commitment of a professional studio, or undergoing formal education. Instead the public can go home and take a crash course in these programs, and if they need professional help, the internet is there to fill the void. Think of it as an electronic tutor.

As the line between technology and talent becomes foggy, it is harder to tell where technology ends and talent begins. A Roland SP-606 can replace a live drummer and create "live" drum lines, or the quality of a digital video camera and program can make the process of film making a whole lot easier. Could we be witnessing an age where talented musicians, film makers, and photographers are going extinct? Or could we be seeing the talents of more people who were once hindered by the "original" process of making music or creating pictures? Where does the nature of the art stand? Is it the hard process of sitting in a darkroom for hours to develop the perfect picture? Or is it the expedient end product of a digital camera? Technology has enabled old time professionals to expand and share their creations (that weren't able to be seen or heard twenty years ago) to broader audiences on multiple mediums, while at the same time younger and novice artists are able to take part in the movement of digital arts and take it to new heights.”

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For Native Americans who highly value their local, place-bound traditions, the influence of media technology over which they historically had no control has been unquestionable. Media has demonstrated its great power to transmit representations of Native Americans and other ethnic peoples, often drawing on and perpetuating media stereotypes that are grossly exaggerated, negative or false.

Culture and history are the substance of ethnicity. They describe governance, language, religion, traditions, belief system, art, music, dress and lifeways that constitute an authentic identity. The central issue and challenge is therefore how media can be used to

strengthen our diversified civil society and grow the audience for Public Service Media at the same time.

With the browning of America's population, all media can no longer afford to ignore ethnic diversity, to "dabble" in ethnic programming with seemingly no real commitment, or to present diversity essentially in terms of a social problem it creates for the majority. Embracing diversity in discourse, intellectual exchange, or through art, music, public affairs, and citizen engagement can provide a range of social benefits towards our collective future. First, it offers Public Service Media audiences an opportunity to expand their knowledge of ethnic peoples and society as a whole. Secondly, it contributes to the positive self image of ethnic peoples and thus to the defining of ourselves. Little Native boys who want to be cowboys instead of Indians after watching an old western on television must also have the opportunity in all mediums to experience authentic stories of who we really are. Third, it provides previously "invisible" populations a place in media, thereby dispelling the myth of an elitist Public Service Media. And finally, an inclusive "Network of Knowledge" contributes to a robust and healthy democracy.

Asking Ourselves the Tough Questions

Growing the audience is about more than access by ethnic peoples to media controlled or owned by others. It is also about control and ownership by Native Americans and other ethnic communities of broadcast facilities that fundamentally mirror back the values of the communities they serve. It is about a media system in America that values the rich, diverse, and robust communities that make up the whole.

Where do we start? The answers are in the questions we ask of our collective Public Service Media and of ourselves as media professionals while we undergo our community reconnaissance and rediscover our neighborhoods, villages, cities and towns.

Does our Public Service Media (Network of Knowledge) provide adequate information to support the community's problem solving, accountability and connectedness?

In Native America, information provided through media technologies constitutes an important nation building tool. The communication of relevant and accurate information is central to economic development, education, public health, political and social growth, and security. Perhaps most important, information plays a critical role in catalyzing the growth of a shared vision of the future, enabling Native Americans and others to articulate and pursue a stronger, more independent, and more vibrant future for themselves.

Does our Public Service Media provide the tools and skills that enable our community members (so inclined) to participate in the community's information networks?

Our media networks are no longer radio centric. The national move towards new broadband-driven digital transformation comes with a promise to make the Internet more

accessible. For this transformation to be successful, the promise must include the provision of the tools and skills that will enable people to participate in our information networks.

Does our Public Service Media have the capacity and staff necessary to create information that addresses the needs and future of our communities?

With the wireless marketplace taking hold in this country and globally in unprecedented terms, the broad array of video, voice and data applications are beginning to be common place. Native Americans, especially tech savvy young Native Americans are able not only to listen to their local radio station, but to instant message, surf the Net, watch videos on their handhelds, socialize, organize and communicate in a multiple ways. These young people are driving innovation in handheld devices now and for the future.

However, the information they are receiving from the broader media is much different than the Native owned and controlled local radio station on their reservations. The potential to reach Native American youth over multiple open network platforms is impressive but yet unrealized. Unless, there is a focused effort to reach Native American youth, generations of Native Americans will continue to experience invisibility on the mediums and/or continue to buy into images that distort their own identity. It is therefore critical to grow Native information intermediaries who are responsible for creating and producing Native content in innovative and creative ways that can result in a richer experience for Native Americans that is relevant, honest, truthful and accurate.

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Is our Public Service Media attentive to issues of access, diversity, relevance, and power?

As innovation increases, so will use. It is critical that Native Americans and other ethnic populations assert our diverse interests in the mediums, call for the relevance of content, and make certain that we are afforded a place at the decision making tables. How will radio and new media technologies be used to serve the public good and what solutions can help us leap over the digital media divide in this country?

Does our Public Service Media have a connection with other community institutions, leaders, young people, and information?

Communications will require Public Service Media to partner with community based organizations to bridge the tools and skills needed for successful community engagement, and to advance community learning on a broad scale. The convergence of data, voice

and video offers new and different opportunities for the interests of the community to be accounted for.

Does our Public Service Media provide a public policy environment that enables our stations and practices to thrive?

In the policy arena, the commercial interest in spectrum based communications must be continually balanced against the compelling public interest and public good. Market based interests balanced against public service spectrum opportunities. Spectrum allocation for the purposes of media will require the public to be vigilant about its efficient use and management. Spectrum based opportunities and services must not only benefit our country as a whole, but all its citizens.

Conclusion

Re-thinking our Public Service Media will take leadership, courage, innovation and creativity. It will require new strategies, an embracing of new metrics, possibly reformatting a station's on-air programming, using new platforms to reach out to new audiences, producing programming that reaches out to un-served or under represented audiences, dedicating HD channels to diverse voices, or providing incentives to well financed stations to risk reaching out to small populations where the economies of scale have been prohibitive, to name a few. The solutions can be as broad and varied as we make them. These are exciting times to repurpose our role as media architects for a new America and to redesign our Public Service Media in a way that sounds and looks more like you and me.

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