

Television and Canada's Aboriginal Communities — Seeking Opportunities through Traditional Storytelling and Digital Technologies.

by Doris Baltruschat

Canada's aboriginal people¹ share a rich story-telling tradition. Communities are spread from the East Coast to the West, with large Inuit settlements in the Northern territories. Mass media, especially television, have become a staple for many through cable, satellite or digital access. This has been an opportunity for broadcasting educational and health programming to remote areas. But it has also been a challenge for First Nations to maintain traditional cultural and linguistic traditions in the face of mass media values transmitted in Canada's dominant languages, English and French. This is especially a problem since many of Canada's indigenous languages are on the brink of extinction.

Cultural globalization poses a challenge to indigenous communities, struggling to maintain cultural integrity in the face of mass media saturation. Local responses in the form of indigenous productions date back decades, but became especially strong in 2000 when First Nation productions proliferated due to the emergence of a new network, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). Producing and creating media is a powerful tool in a media landscape predominantly focused on Canada's English and French cultures. Gaining access to mainstream commercial and public channels has been difficult. However, with the emergence of APTN, First Nation languages, culture and ideas can be mediated through a public forum of interest not only to indigenous communities in Canada, but also in the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

¹ The terms Aboriginal Peoples, indigenous peoples and First Nations will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The first part of this essay will briefly introduce the historical background of indigenous communications media in Canada with a particular focus on the most recent venture, the Aboriginal Peoples Television network (APTN). Interview evidence from First Nation producers highlights the importance of access to communication means to explore, express and negotiate cultural spaces challenged by political, economic and cultural globalization. In part two, questions of globalization, localization and hybridity are addressed, as a way to gain access to the broadcasting market, on the one hand, and to establish and document historical fact, cultural values and identity, on the other hand.

Communication between non-natives and indigenous communities has historically played a pivotal role in maintaining control over social and economic relations and institutions. Early on, English became the dominant language used in the interaction between natives and non-natives, and it was also the English language in print, radio and television broadcasts that dominated the air-waves (Valaskakis, 1988, p. 126). Radio was introduced in the Arctic in the 1920s, with television broadcasts in English and French following in the 1960s. In response, Inuit leaders raised concerns regarding the nature of commercial television:

...my main concern and I am sure it is the concern of many people in the North, is that you have two audiences watching television, one group that does not understand a word of English and the other does and most of the programming is in English.

(Norman Attungula quoted in Valaskakis, 1988, p. 125).

The introduction of broadcast technologies and transmission of non-indigenous cultural and social values, combined with curricula and teaching from the south, affected First Nations and contributed to social disintegration (Valaskakis, 1988, p. 126) and cultural hybridization. Grantzberg (1982) noted that the influence of television on children in native communities was especially evident (quoted in Valaskakis, 1988, p. 128) as television heroes became an integral part of children's play, undermining the potential for in-group role players who could

assume these positions. However, the channeling of public funds into developing radio and television programs also resulted in the establishment of numerous native communication societies across Northern Canada, gradually introducing a balance to mainstream media exposure (APTN, 2002).

In Canada's south, the Alberta Native Communications Society (ANCS) became the first Aboriginal broadcasting enterprise in 1960s (Rupert, 1983). It was the impetus for the development of other Aboriginal broadcasting organizations throughout Canada who reached their audiences via remote transmitters or satellite (Fraser, 1994). The emergence of aboriginal media in the 1960s highlights that Canada's First Nations people recognized an opportunity early on to create their own media for local community interaction and economic growth. The proliferation of aboriginal media continued throughout the following decades with various broadcast initiatives and a growing number of First Nations producers of documentaries and drama.

In 1978, the Canadian government experimented with satellite communication in the Arctic. Soon after, the Anik B satellite was launched to broadcast educational and health programs to Inuit organizations in Nunavut (formerly known as the Northwest Territories) and Northern Quebec. In 1980, the Canadian Radio–television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC)² proposed the development of broadcasting services for the preservation of First Nations' language and culture. As a result, programs were delivered from the Canadian South to remote northern communities. In addition, First Nations broadcasters in the North received development assistance to create their own programming.

One of the pivotal moments in the development of First Nations' broadcasting occurred in 1983 when the Canadian government announced the

² Canada's official regulator of matters pertaining to communications and broadcasting licensing and regulations; similar to the Federal Communications Commission in the United States.

Northern Broadcasting Policy and the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program. It became evident that communities in Northern Canada would benefit from a cooperative broadcasting system. The establishment of a technical infrastructure, and public support for the development of radio and television programs laid the foundation for numerous native communication societies across Northern Canada (APTN, 2002).

In 1985, the Canadian government recognized that a dedicated transponder was needed to distribute television programs across the northern territories. This laid the groundwork for a northern satellite distribution system, and, in 1991, Television Northern Canada (TVNC) was launched. Between 1997 and 1999, the TVNC Board of Directors and its staff made regular presentations to Aboriginal communities. It also submitted proposals to the CRTC. As a result, the CRTC released a notice in 1998, which stated that an Aboriginal network should be “widely available throughout Canada in order to serve the diverse needs of the various Aboriginal communities, as well as other Canadians” (CRTC Public Notice, 1998). In the following months, the TVNC board submitted an application to the CRTC for a broadcast license for the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network—a move supported and endorsed by Aboriginal Canada³ and the public. In 1999, APTN was launched, and, over the following months, became available to over 8 million homes via cable television, direct-to-home and wireless service (APTN, 2002).

With the emergence of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), a new chapter in aboriginal broadcasting has begun. The network is unique in its operation, mandate and programming focus and, to this date, remains the only one of its kind in the world. The programs blend traditional forms of storytelling with contemporary genre adapted from mainstream media. APTN features programs on aboriginal affairs, news in Inuktituk, cooking and crafts shows, documentaries on First Nations’ artist and community leaders and

³ Aboriginal Canada or the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, a government agency.

children's programming. Most of APTN's programs originate in Canada (more than 70%), and are broadcast in English (60%), French (15%) and a variety of Aboriginal languages (25%) (ibid).

One of the key features of APTN is its multi-lingual approach to broadcasting. Programs in traditional languages such as Cree, Inuktitut and Lakota provide an opportunity for Canada's more than sixty indigenous languages to be spoken and heard through televised means. Interviews with indigenous elders and community leaders highlight discussions about environmental concerns, land claims and natural resources. In addition, children's programs in indigenous languages allow for the continuation of linguistic traditions as new generations are exposed to ancestral voices (Dana Claxton, First Nations producer and filmmaker, interview, April 10, 2003). Discussions on language preservation are highlighted as well, as First Nations seek to gain official status for their languages to ensure that aboriginal traditions will not become extinct (APTN, 2002). In the words of one of the current board members, Catherine Martin:

It is a very challenging time in our history as First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples ... The media is a powerful tool to help our nations heal and bring understanding through the telling of our own stories. APTN, as the first Aboriginal television network in the world, can be a catalyst for change in our lives.

(Press release, December 16, 2002).

This reference to story telling traditions is key to understanding the choice of narratives APTN produces or acquires for broadcasting. Television being a visual and aural, as well as textual experience, provides a new means for First Nations people to communicate and connect with other indigenous groups throughout Canada and the US. These groups are bound together by similar experiences of assimilation, discrimination, and displacement. They are also tied by cultural and linguistic traditions that transcend official borders.

First Nation documentary productions highlight socio-political and cultural issues. According to Dana Claxton, producer of the APTN children's series 'Artzone', many new and up-coming filmmakers are eager to document their history, culture and stories. Traditionally underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media, producers seize an opportunity to create programs that would not be aired on any other channel, not even public broadcasting (interview, April 10, 2003). And even if mainstream television attempts to portray First Nations stories, it will, according to Claxton always fall short in accurately dealing with indigenous issues:

The mainstream media can never tell our stories. They can try, but in terms of really knowing the interior of a culture, it's got to be the people who speak for themselves.
(interview, April 10, 2003)

Canadians want to know about First Nations people, and APTN provides a window into the lives and cultures of indigenous communities (ibid).

First Nations producers are also documenting ancient indigenous rites and cultures; therefore, providing an important record of Native life in Canada. Cultural appropriation of crafts, weaving and arts by non-natives is a concern. According to Barb Cranmer, a well-known West Coast documentary producer and Band Council member of her First Nations community, indigenous weaving and knitting styles have been appropriated for mainstream fashion. Here, globalization is encroaching on the local, creating concerns about cultural identity, and the need to maintain correct records for future generations:

"I need to tell the stories before our elders pass on. There is an urgency for some stories to be told, such as stories about the environment and the salmon runs.... Our stories are generally not shared with the bigger world, so there is a need for educating people ... I see myself as a messenger of stories people entrust me with."
(Barb Cranmer, Nimpkish Wind Productions, interview, April 12, 2003).

Cranmer is concerned about potential 'exoticisation' of First Nation life in mainstream media. This may even arise from young First Nation filmmakers who

seek to adapt and popularize indigenous folklore and cultural values for sensationalist mainstream consumption (ibid). First Nations producers, therefore, find themselves in a predicament—to document and record their way of life, on the one hand, and to create a viable cultural television or film ‘product’ that appeals to mainstream audiences, on the other hand.

This dichotomy is also evident in APTN’s mandate and program focus. Even though APTN provides a unique opportunity for First Nations’ producers, its operations are, nonetheless, similar to mainstream networks. For example, it focuses on the production and acquisition of one-hour and serial documentaries—a common practice for television networks. It also encourages inter-provincial co-productions⁴ and international co-productions⁵, especially with France. It’s mandate has, therefore, a dual focus: 1) the promotion of and education about aboriginal culture and language, and 2) the increase of revenue through exporting programs and attending international television markets⁶ (Jim Compton, Director of Programming, APTN, interview, March 20, 2003). The commercial aspects of the network are crucial since many traditional income sources for aboriginal people no longer exist. According to Compton, the networks’ programming director, the “trap lines” are now expanding into other revenue sources, such as broadcasting, to generate jobs and monies for aboriginal peoples (ibid).

Some programs, such as feature length films, are imported from the United States. Again, this reflects a common practice amongst networks outside the US—American programs are easy to acquire at low cost. Nonetheless, since its inauguration in 1999, APTN has also triggered program development in the

⁴ Inter-provincial co-productions pertain to collaboration of producers from different Canadian provinces for the benefit of accessing additional funds and creative resources.

⁵ International television co-productions are governed by official bi-lateral treaties between Canada and other countries. This mode of production allows for the pooling of technical and creative resources and access to additional funding and markets for distribution.

⁶ Television markets such as MIPCOM in France and NATPE in the US, and trade forums in Australia and New Zealand.

US, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. Interest from Native Americans in APTN's programming is strong, as letters to the network attest to. According to Compton, Native Americans would like to see APTN's signal extended into their communities, and negotiations are currently under way to make this a reality. Native American interest in APTN underscores the notion that aboriginal people share a common bond through their history, language and culture, which is not restricted by national boundaries. Aboriginal people in Australia and New Zealand are also interested in APTN's programs (ibid). The Maori of New Zealand are currently developing their own television station, which will be launched in 2003 (Maori TV, 2003).

The potential for international co-production between First Nations producers is apparent, considering similarities in experiences and interests. Cranmer notes that she has been approached by a Maori filmmaker to collaborate on a story about a young woman from her community who was adopted by a family in New Zealand (interview, April 12, 2003). These types of international co-productions on a grass-roots level are a welcome addition to the multitude of commercial collaborations that currently circulate through global airwaves. Local responses, combined with global experience and critical perspective, provide balance and diversity in our media landscape.

Digital media provide an accessible alternative for production and distribution. Similar to other networks, APTN's website provides on-line options for promotion, education and teaching materials. The historical series on the Ojibwe people, titled *Waasa-Inaabidaa* ("We look In All Directions"), also features an elaborate and interactive website (Ojibwe, 2003). The series, produced by Lorraine Norrgard with input from PBS, attempts to expand programs in indigenous languages in southern parts of Canada and northern areas of the US (Compton, interview, March 20, 2003). The collaboration between First Nations producers, public broadcasters and organizations like the National Film Board of Canada highlights the need to pool resources—technical, financial and

creative—in a competitive and expensive production industry. Again, standard industry practices determine APTN's production and distribution focus.

Since 2001, APTN has increasingly focused on the youth market, one of the most important demographic groups for mainstream television as well. Programs such as “Cool Jobs” are aimed at First Nations youth seeking employment. The show uses MTV-type camera moves, ‘funky’ sound tracks, and ‘hip’ entertainment-style hosting and interviewing techniques to engage viewers between the ages of 13–25. Another program, “Seventh Generation” features young First Nations entrepreneurs celebrating their success in business. The series is an educational forum for young First Nations people, navigating their life through difficult and scarce employment opportunities. The message is ‘empowerment’ and strengthening of First Nations’ community ties to facilitate advancement and success.

One of APTN's biggest challenges is the lack of access to technology in First Nations communities. Even though the network is popular with audiences, the exact number of viewers is difficult to estimate. Many questions remain, such as how many First Nations people own or have access to a television set? And if they do, are they actually watching the network's programming? (Compton, personal interview, March 20, 2003). There is no doubt, however, that aboriginal producers of film and television are experiencing a resurgence of their culture by combining traditional story telling and digital technology.

The film ‘Atanarjuat’, the Fast Runner has received international acclaim and a ‘Camera d’Or’ award for best feature at the 2001 film festival in Cannes. The story, based on an ancient Inuit legend, deals with the dangers of setting personal desires above the needs of a whole community. In Atanarjuat, a film produced by Norm Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk with the help of the National Film Board of Canada, traditional storytelling is combined with digital technology to create a unique film. The accessibility of digital video, its relatively cheap

production budget and ease of technology has allowed the filmmakers to create an original point of view of indigenous life in Canada's North:

...video [is] a different way of representing reality. It's a different form of narrative story telling. All this video experience has been invisible except in the art world and in remote regions where it's been an empowering tool for self-representation by getting inside-out points of view instead of the kind of authoritarian outside-in points of view. So this whole concept is a marriage of what was really a very experimental art form, video, with the richness of Inuit oral tradition (Cohn, 2002).

The combination of traditional story-telling and digital technology resulted in a film that is very different from mainstream media. This blending of traditional ways with new media is possibly creating a new genre of indigenous arts forms and documentary styles to be explored by filmmakers in the future. This may be an attempt of counter-globalization and to turn "media that dissolve and homogenize cultures into tools of cultural preservation" (Scott, July 14, 2002), but it is also a way to generate funds and employment for First Nation's communities.

In television, we see less innovative trends. Many programs use traditional documentary techniques and technologies (Cranmer, interview, April 12, 2003). What is unique, however, is the myriad of indigenous content that is produced. Many programs deal with traditional and cultural values. They feature west coast weaving techniques, Haida art and traditional cultural rites. Documentation of these events represents a first, not only from an aboriginal production point of view but also in regards to subject matter. Even though First Nations make up 3–5% of Canada's population, with large population concentrations in the Prairie region and the northern territories, they have been traditionally underrepresented in mainstream media, or misrepresented due to stereotyping of aboriginal life (Fraser, 1994) The emergence of prolific production activities amongst First Nations peoples is, therefore, a necessity, to create a more balanced media in Canada and beyond.

In spite of its unique character, APTN reveals characteristics of mainstream media. It's adaptation of popular genre such as variety shows, from crafts to cooking, highlights the necessity to produce globally appealing products, which can be traded and sold in the international television market. The nature of some of these programs allows the viewer to experience *cultural hybridity in action*, the cultural transformation and adaptation of ideas and concepts. For example, an episode of "The Creative Native", an arts and crafts show on APTN, features the making of Christmas ornaments by combining traditional Aboriginal head dress with a non-native holiday concept. Cooking shows, such as "Cooking with the Wolfman", feature traditional foods and recipes combined with world cuisine such as Italian or French.

APTN's focus on youth as a consumer group for creating network loyalty is similar to mainstream network operations. In addition, technical aspects, from 'MTV' style camera moves to fast editing techniques, simulate mainstream television in an attempt to compete for market shares. This juxtaposition of traditional storytelling, mainstream genre and production techniques, creates a hybrid experience where *globalization* and *localization* are negotiated for new territories of cultural expression.

This negotiation for new cultural spaces highlights the continuous change of cultures, accelerated by globalization and mass-mediated consumption patterns. Here, the local response to mainstream media, is the creation of alternative media from an indigenous perspective, which as new generations of filmmakers emerge changes to reveal mainstream foci and populism. APTN is an example of a unique network that combines alternative programming and mainstream broadcasting styles in a blend that does not exist anywhere else.

Global media provide instantaneous access to different cultures, traditions and stories. Infused with romantic ideas of non-conflictual existence, global cultural products portray the exoticism of far-away worlds in digital colour and

sound. From Discovery to Disney, culture is transformed into an accessible and consumable 'eye candy'. Travel and adventure programs highlight the beauty and allure of countries such as Africa and Latin America without ever revealing discrepancies based on economic, political and cultural interdependencies. Globe-trotting through a televised landscape, the armchair tourist would never suspect that the true nature of many destinations is based on the struggle for economic equilibria, access to healthcare, education and prosperity enjoyed by many western nations.

In contrast, aboriginal programs are distinctly different, even though they may exhibit mainstream media characteristics for the sake of global program appeal. A network such as APTN is predominantly aimed at First Nations' viewers and audiences. The stories told in the programs are unique and have not been told in this format before. They document a people struggling for cultural survival in a global economy. At the same time, the motivation and need to succeed makes producers and network executives part of the global economy as they attempt to create a viable broadcasting business. This dichotomy is expressed in the program schedule, which features the traditional next to the hybrid.

First Nations productions and the Aboriginal Peoples Television network highlight the potential for creating co-productions based on shared interests and content rather than mere financial gain (Baltruschat, 2003). Here, the possibility to document stories as they relate to peoples who share, in spite of geographic distance, cultural similarities and historical backgrounds, provides an opportunity for global stories to be told from a critical perspective. First Nations stories and their underlying message for preservation of cultural traditions also relate to environmental protection, which is often tied closely to traditional life styles and cultural expressions (Cranmer, interview, April 12, 2003).

The development of digital technologies and their ease of transfer from one digital medium to another offers an opportunity for young emerging filmmakers to explore their own stories based on local and emerging global perspectives. Diversity, balance and critical perspectives are crucial in a media landscape saturated with infotainment, commercial productions and sensationalized reality-TV programs. Even though First Nations producers and APTN tend to adapt their productions to mainstream genre, they, nonetheless, also realize a potential of television—the ability to educate, entertain and mediate debate critically through broadcasting channels.

References:

The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (2002). *Official Website*. On-line. Available at: <http://www.aptn.ca> [June 5, 2002].

Baltruschat, Doris (2003). International Film and TV Co-production: A Canadian Case Study. In Simon Cottle (Eds.) *Media Organisation and Production*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 181–207.

Canadian Radio–television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). (1998). Additional National Television Networks – A Report to the Government of Canada pursuant to Order in Council. *Public Notice CRTC 1998-8*. (On-line). Available at: <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/eng/Notices/1998/PB98-8.htm> [January 5, 2003].

Cohn, Norman. (2002). Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner, *IndieWire*, On-line. http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int_Cohn_Kunuk_020605.html [May, 6, 2002].

Fraser, Fil. (1994). The participation of Aboriginal and other cultural minorities in Cultural Development. *Journal of Communications*, (on-line edition), 19 (3–4), no page number.

Martin, Catherine (2002, December 16). Media Release. New APTN Board Executive Elected. *APTN Official Website*. On-line. Available at <http://www.aptn.ca>. [February 10, 2003].

Maori TV. (2003). Official Website. On-line. Available at: <http://www.maoritelevision.com/static/home.htm>. [April 18, 2003].

Meadows, Michael (1995). Ideas from the Bush: Indigenous Television in Australia and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, (on-line edition), 20 (2), no page number.

Ojibwe.org. (2003). *Waasa-Inaabidaa "We look In All Directions"*, produced by Lorraine Norrgard. On-line. Available at <http://www.ojibwe.org/home/home.html> [April 9, 2003].

Rupert, Robert. (1983). Native Broadcasting in Canada. *Anthropologica*, 25(1), 53–61.

Scott, A.O. (2002, July 7). Reel Change, in *New York Times Magazine*, pp., 11–12.

Valaskakis, Gail. (1988). Television and cultural integration: Implications for Native communities in the Canadian North. In Rowland Lorimer and Donald Wilson (Eds.), *Communication Canada* (pp. 124–138). Toronto: Kagan and Woo.