

WARMING THE ARCTIC AIR: CULTURAL POLITICS AND ALASKA NATIVE RADIO

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Abstract

This article charts and analyses the place of community radio among rural-based Native Alaskans. The introduction of community radio received major financial support during the War on Poverty in the 1960s, but since has had to struggle and compromise on principles of control for existence. One of the outcomes of this struggle was increasing cultural self-awareness and willingness to engage in collective actions by Alaska Natives. The analysis of this development leans on Carey's notion of a ritual view of communication, and the authors contend, in conclusion, that the cultural integrity of Native peoples in Alaska requires restoration of local control over community radio.

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Introduction

In the 1970s, Alaska Natives embarked on a communications revolution with the introduction of community radio into the isolated villages of rural Alaska.¹ Its origination in 1971 occurred in perhaps the most unlikely area in the vast reaches of tundra Alaska: at Bethel, the Yup'ik village hub of the lower Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in south-western Alaska and, by all accounts, the poorest region in the US. Following the establishment of KYUK in Bethel, similar stations were launched in the Inupiaq communities of Kotzebue (Qikiqtagruk) in 1973, and Barrow (Ukpiagvik) in 1975. In just 15 years, the system would comprise 10 full-service stations located in communities with populations under 3,500. //

These developments were part of a general cultural renaissance among Alaska Natives. Indeed, the story of community radio in Alaska is most significant insofar as it is bound to struggles for cultural revitalisation among Alaska's diverse indigenous groups. While the fight for control over land and subsistence rights is far from over, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 was the pivotal attempt to resolve the profoundly conflicting interests of Natives and Caucasians in the Far North. Many Natives have criticised the act, for it set up a capitalist corporate structure for disbursing \$1 billion and 44 million acres of land in compensation for the loss of ancestral territories. But it had one positive cultural consequence. As Oswald (1990, 189) explains, cultural renewal was an inevitable result of the agreement:

It could not have been otherwise. For individuals and groups to be recognized under the act's terms they were required to prove their Native heritage in overlapping biological, historical, and legal contexts. . . . Successful claims conferred membership in a regional and village corporation plus rights to land and money. Because of these advantages a personal identity as a Native Alaskan became a favourable status for the first time in this century.

Even before the settlement, however, Natives had organised themselves into regional and local associations. Many of these groups were direct outcomes of the federal government's Office of Economic Opportunity. As we will see, the development of community radio was partly a consequence of regional gatherings of Alaska Natives, brought together by President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty programmes. Its establishment was also a matter of state initiatives as money began to flow from the lease of state land for oil extraction. But beyond the actions of federal or state policy-makers, the inauguration of community radio was fundamentally an act of cultural assertion. One of our informants, a Yup'ik Elder, told us community leaders had to "kick open some doors" in Washington to get KYUK started (M. Gregory 1997). In defying the stereotype of Eskimos as reticent and passive, this Elder confirmed Oswald's (1990) claim that Yup'iks are "bashful no longer."

The purpose of this article is to explore the cultural significance of community radio in Alaska by analysing its origination and early development in Bethel. After some theoretical remarks, the article proceeds as follows: First, we glance at Native-Caucasian contact in the Kuskokwim region. Missionaries were particularly important in the early years, while the US military was a major acculturating force in the Second World War and the Cold War. Second, we consider how programmes connected with the War on Poverty in the 1960s and early 1970s stimulated grass-roots efforts at infrastructural development, including local radio, in Native communities.

Third, we sketch the development of the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission, the state agency responsible for community radio. Fourth, we examine the radio station itself, focusing primarily on the philosophy and purposes underpinning its establishment and operation. In the article's conclusion, we explore the future of community radio in Alaska.

Theorising the Research Problems

Any study that deals with indigenous peoples must begin with the recognition that this is not a problem in multicultural identity politics with different settler groups sorting out their identities in the national imaginary. Instead, it is a question of indigenous cultural politics based in the land and justified in claims for self-determination (Bennett and Blundell 1995, 2). Recognising people's fundamental right to speak in their own cultural voices, we begin with James Carey's acknowledgement that "people live in qualitatively distinct zones of experience that cultural forms organise in different ways" (1989, 66). Carey's ritual view of communication recognises the centrality of the communicative process in creating, modifying, and transforming a shared culture. This definition of "communication as culture" resonates with the Yup'iks' self-identification of their traditional culture as one that emphasises "speaking out to create, maintain, and perpetuate a well-governed society" (Fienup-Riordan 1990, 198).

The tension between tradition and innovation is another critical issue in any study of indigenous groups. In Western discursive practices, this issue is most often posed as a matter of polar opposites, where First Peoples are either lodged in the iron cage of a timeless essential past or bound for assimilation into mainstream Western life. We follow an alternative conceptual path forged by Canadian communication scholar Gail Valaskakis. She argues that for First Peoples, "resistance is cultural persistence; the social memory and lived experience of traditionalism continually negotiated in the discourse and practice of everyday life" (Valaskakis 1993, 293). With respect to the development of community radio in rural Alaska, we suggest that cultural persistence has been effected through the exertion of control over programming by indigenous peoples. In so doing, Alaska Natives have minimised the centralising tendency of the mass media to import alien ideas from remote centres of political and cultural power.

Early Western Contacts

Western contact with the indigenous peoples of Alaska has historically turned on access to commercially exploitable resources. Starting with the eighteenth century Russian harvest of sea otters in the Aleutians, the commercial exploitation of natural resources was enormously disruptive to subsistence cultures, leading in many instances to mass starvation and the near-extinction of indigenous peoples. Ironically, the Yup'ik Eskimos of the Kuskokwim region experienced minimal disruption because the region lacked any significant exploitable resources (Fienup-Riordan 1990, 25-26; Oswalt 1990, 94). As a consequence of these "resource deficits," the first significant Western influences on the Yup'iks were Moravian missionaries, led by John and Edith Kilbuck, who established the town of Bethel in 1885 (Fienup-Riordan 1991, 33).

Fienup-Riordan suggests that the Kilbucks were probably more empathetic to Native ways than most missionaries because John Kilbuck was a Delaware Indian (1991, 11-12). As a result, the Kilbucks learned and preached in the Yup'ik language.

Still, there were numerous aspects of Yup'ik culture that the Kilbucks were quite interested in eradicating. A prime target was the *qasgiq*, the communal living quarters for men where the oral traditions were passed on. The Kilbucks did persuade the Yup'ik men to move into single-family homes, but the values underlying the *qasgiq* and other traditional institutions remain. In a sense, the role of the *qasgiq* has been assumed by the village council and, in many villages, it is making a reappearance altogether with the resurgence of a sovereignty movement in south-western Alaska (Fienup-Riordan 1990, 215). For our purposes, the continuing role of the *qasgiq* is important because the communicative style that it embodies is the discursive practice of speaking out, voicing opinions, and listening to the advice of others — all practices which get played out as well in the environment shaped by community radio. In short, the traditions of Yup'ik culture faded, but were not erased, under the missionary influence of the Kilbucks.

The Military and Communication Technologies

Movies were introduced to Bethel in 1924, with the cost of admission being one dried salmon (Lenz and Barker 1985, 45). Still, major cultural changes did not take place in Bethel in particular, nor Alaska generally, until World War II. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, as McBeath and Morehouse put it, colonial Alaska was catapulted into the twentieth century (1994, 78). Bethel's strategic position near the Pacific theatre would mean the establishment of an Army Airfield in 1942 and the arrival of more than 300 soldiers, nearly equalling Bethel's population. A year later, radio appeared with the licensing of military station WXLB. By the war's end, there were some 23 Armed Forces stations operating in Alaska, but most of them — including Bethel's WXLB — were discontinued as military installations were dismantled (Duncan 1982, 81-91). However, Alaska's proximity to the Soviet Union hastened the development of a telecommunications infrastructure in support of military objectives during the Cold War. The Distant Early Warning system (DEW Line), a chain of radar stations stretching across the North American continent to the east coast of Greenland, was built in the mid-1950s to detect an attack by Russian aircraft. A more benign system, code-named White Alice, was a radio interconnection project run by the Air Force for military and civilian telephonic communication throughout Alaska from the mid-1950s until 1969 when it was sold to RCA. A military radio repeater station was on line in Bethel by 1959 as part of the White Alice project.

Therefore, it was Alaska's strategic geopolitical position that brought broadcasting to rural areas. The strange-looking transmitting dishes, receiving screens, and white domes of the DEW Line and White Alice systems were the surveillance eyes and ears of the military, but the Yup'ik and Inupiat ears they reached through their repeater stations were not particularly attentive. In our interviews with people familiar with these stations, we were told that for young people, the military stations provided more reliable access to popular music than the occasional night time signals from Radio Luxembourg or commercial stations in Anchorage, Fairbanks, or Nome. The stations also provided valuable weather reports. Otherwise, they were largely irrelevant.

The War Against Poverty

Bethel was one of the largest Native villages by the 1960s, but its population remained extremely poor. However, because of welfare legislation and the national

security state, the operative mechanisms of social control in rural Alaska increasingly emanated from federal and state governmental agencies. Lenz writes that while “the Yup’ik way of life remained intact far longer than that of almost any other Native American people in the United States,” Bethel became the staging area of social service agencies in the 1960s. With bureaucracy one of the town’s main industries, she adds, “children grew so used to references like the BIA, FAA, and LKSD, they called the local ice cream parlour, the ICP” (in Lenz and Barker 1985, 5).

President Johnson’s War on Poverty, launched in 1964, provided programmes as well as ideological positions that facilitated the cultural and political renaissance of Alaska Natives. A prime player was a young Inupiaq from Barrow, Charles Edwardsen. As a student at Sitka’s Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school — not far from the state capital in Juneau — Edwardsen had cut his teeth on news of the civil rights movement. His role in raising Native consciousness emerged after the passage of Johnson’s landmark civil rights and poverty legislation. Of enormous significance for Native activism were the premises underlying the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) Act of 1964: that poor Americans lacked control over programs that were meant to help them, and lacked access to the agencies shaping policy directed at them. Thus, local control and access were cornerstones of the OEO’s Community Action Programmes aimed at eliminating poverty (Smith 1982, 102).

Edwardsen’s activist orientation advantageously meshed with the OEO initiatives that would soon dominate Alaska’s rural landscape. He believed that they offered Alaska Natives opportunities to pursue their interests with federal aid, without — for the first time ever — having to go through the despised Bureau of Indian Affairs. Land was his central concern. Edwardsen was intent on regaining the Arctic North for the Inupiat, acting on a principle he learned from reading the historian Hubert Bancroft when he was sixteen: that the United States could not buy what the Russians never owned (Gallagher 1974, 17).

Consequently, in late 1965, Edwardsen mapped out the territory historically occupied by the Inupiat and invited villagers within its boundaries to file a joint land claim. While representatives from the Kotzebue Sound region demurred, preferring to file their own claim, the upshot was the 1966 formation of the Arctic Slope Native Association (ASNA), arguably the most important group in the Eskimo-Indian movement for historic land rights. The organisation claimed that 96 million acres of land — an area slightly smaller than California — was theirs by right of historic use and occupancy. The growing confidence and assertiveness of Native activists was reflected in a *Tundra Times* editorial about the ASNA movement (May 27, 1966):

Its leaders are young men who are not afraid to speak out. Their utterances are succinct, terse and to the point. The statements they make publicly are hashed out at meetings and these sessions are not always sweetness and light but are often heated. This, contrary to the belief that Eskimos are placid in nature. . . .

Poverty-related programmes exerted considerable influence throughout rural Alaska, impacting prominently on the emergence of community radio. Most radio transmission in the Bush involved point-to-point transmissions aimed at handling emergencies. A Federal Field Committee investigating conditions in rural Alaska pursuant to settling Native land claims summarised the status of communication in 1968:

Communication with most villages is by letter or radio, for only 23 native villages have telephone service linking them to other places (another 70 places can be

reached by radio telephone link-ups). Not all of the villages have radio transmitters and receivers, and even if they do, communication may be made uncertain by climatic conditions. And since most of the transmitters and receivers are in state or federal schools, their use is limited to official business and emergencies (Federal Field Committee 1968, 43).

In other words, what little communication infrastructure there was rested firmly in professional hands.

The Institutional Setting for Public Radio in Alaska

Sargent Shriver, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, visited Bethel in 1967 and declared the region's poverty as "deep, tragic, and appalling as any in the world" (*Tundra Time* July 7, 1967). This impoverished region was home to one-fourth of the State's Native peoples. Yup'ik villagers were, however, using War on Poverty programmes to attack their problems. About a year after Shriver's visit, South-western Alaska's Association of Village Council Presidents issued a declaration calling for village electrification, safe water supplies, sanitary waste disposal systems, and improved communication. They envisioned radio as central to their needs and adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of a station that would provide employment, supplement education, and enhance local thinking (*Tundra Time* September 27, 1968).

Elsewhere, state officials were trying to institutionalise control over educational broadcasting. The eventual outcome was the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission (AEBC), later renamed the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission (APBC). Its development was complicated, tied to evolving national policies on broadcasting and satellite communications. Let us quickly unravel this story.

The 1967 Public Broadcasting Act settled disputes among several contenders for the control of satellite delivery of educational broadcasting, granting this right to the Communication Satellite Corporation (COMSAT) (Gibson 1977, 120-122, 139-140). Upset that Alaska was outside COMSAT's footprint, Alaska Senator Bob Bartlett called for a state commission to develop policy on communication satellites (*Tundra Time* September 8, 1967). In response, Governor Walter Hickel formed the Satellite Communication Task Force, which later became a subcommittee of the AEBC (*Tundra Time* April 5, 1968; APBC 1990, 12). A second relevant committee was assembled by the Commissioner of Education to draft legislation for a state broadcasting system. The committee's draft legislation went nowhere in either the 1967 or 1968 Alaska legislatures. However, in 1969, Governor Keith Miller re-energised the dormant committee. Charles Northrip, general manager of Alaska's only public radio station, KUAC, in Fairbanks, was named executive director, a position he would hold off and on for thirteen years. In 1970, the state legislature formally recognised the task force as the AEBC.

Meanwhile, community leaders in Bethel had formed an Economic Development Committee with federal assistance. High on its list of priorities was the 1968 charge from the Village Council Presidents to start a radio station. The Committee talked with Northrip about possible state funding, and in the winter of 1969, he made a presentation about radio to a Bethel community gathering. Northrip (1998) told us that his philosophy on public radio underwent a major change during that visit. He had gone to Bethel with a mainstream, urban view of public radio — that it did what commercial radio failed to do, by programming classical music, public affairs discussions, and high-brow features. A story told by a public health nurse from an

outlying village made him reassess his elitism. She described her encounter with a woman who said her baby's ears needed checking. Finding the baby's ears to be normal, the nurse reassured the woman. But the woman insisted that she check again, because, she said, her other four children had had fluid running out of their ears when they were babies. The nurse's poignant point was the dire need for a forum to talk to people about wellness. Urban Alaska had such facilities, but rural Alaska was another world. Northrip realised that radio had to be local. Right from its beginnings, then, the AEBC adhered to a philosophy of local control, voiced repeatedly in its official statements (see AEBC 1973).

The Formation of KYUK

The first meeting of Bethel Broadcasting, Inc. (BBI) was held on March 25, 1970. With officers representing the Kuskokwim Valley Native Association and the Village Council Presidents, the board adopted articles of incorporation that provided for local control of policy, personnel, and operations, and outlined the station's purpose: "through its programme preparation and broadcasting services to encourage and assist all people, but particularly the poor people, in areas reached by its broadcasts to raise their social and economic level and generally to enrich the quality of their lives" (FCC 1970).

In its FCC construction permit application, the BBI noted that "education levels in this region are among the lowest in the entire United States. Median school years completed average 1.9 for Natives in the area, compared with an average of 12.9 years for non-natives" (FCC 1970). While further justifications cited the assistance the station would offer in employment, health and nutrition, news, and community improvement, its most compelling justification dealt with Eskimo culture:

KICY (Nome), the only radio station which programmes in Eskimo, serves . . . an area in which the dialect of Eskimo spoken cannot be understood by peoples of South-western Alaska. The proposed radio station, programming in both English and in the Yup'ik dialect of the South-western region, would provide a much needed outlet for the region's cultural heritage. This could be an important factor in maintaining cultural pride and respect for the Natives in the area (FCC 1970).

With \$30,000 in state money, a small contribution from the City of Bethel, and a matching grant from the federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, KYUK-AM went on the air May 13, 1971, as the first Native-owned-and-operated public radio station in the US (FCC 1970). Right from the beginning, KYUK's operations, programming, and tone were decidedly local. A comparison of KYUK with aboriginal Australian radio is instructive here, for they exemplified local, community access media in similar ways. Writing about the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Michaels notes that its community focus did not always show up in content, but that it emerged on air through the station's format, announcers' style, and call-in cheerios, all of which gave the station authority and resonance for its Aboriginal audience (1994, 29). Reflecting a similar tone, KYUK's bilingual announcer began his broadcasts with "Angelanaqvaa [Oh, what fun!] . . . KYUK . . . On the air now" — all said, according to a *Tundra Time's* characterisation, with an Eskimo dance rhythm (June 23, 1971).

The community greeted the station with great excitement. At a time when the tower was still on the ground and the signal only reached ten percent of its expected range, KYUK was getting 60 fan letters a day. For a non-literate population under 2,500, the

volume of letters spoke loudly to the community ethos which the station generated. One listener wrote in, "You can't imagine what a difference the station makes in our lives. . . Little things, like before if we wanted to get word around town that a meeting was cancelled we had to knock on doors. Now we just phone the station." The article's description of the response to KYUK's "Eskimo Story Hour" in which local legends were told in Yup'ik provides further evidence of the participatory ethos fostered through the station's programming: Readers were informed that "Villagers along the Kuskokwim are so enthusiastic about it that they are making tapes of their own stories and the station hopes to use them if it can resolve problems with sound quality" (*Tundra Time* June 23, 1971).

Beneath the surface, however, KYUK faced problems. Less than a month after the station went on line, the local *Kuskokwim Kronicle* reported that "Bethel has been totally involved in its latest innovation Radio Station KYUK for nearly three weeks now, and loving every minute of it. [However], that love affair may come to an end in July. . .if funding for the station's continued operation is not forthcoming from the state." What is important here is not so much the financial crisis — this particular emergency would be averted — but the community's impassioned response. In the words of Bethel Economic Development Committee spokesperson Charlie Guinn, "This is our station. I think we have a sense of pride and ownership. . . . We also need to keep this station. To do everything within our power to insure its future" (*Kuskokwim Kronicle*, June 1, 1971).

A second problem involved a fracture over station management between Yup'iks and Caucasians. According to the *Tundra Times*, KYUK's bilingual announcer was an unexpected find by the station's white manager, who had told the BBI's board that finding an experienced radio announcer who spoke Yup'ik was an "impossibility" (June 23, 1971). Aside from the implicit advocacy of Western professionalism or the rejection of indigenous production as amateurish, this comment foreshadowed trouble that would erupt two months later, when the BBI board replaced the manager with a Yup'ik Eskimo. The director of the BBI board was quoted as saying that the substitution was made to ensure that Bethel radio would "meet the needs of the people in the area" (*Kuskokwim Kronicle*, September 8, 1971).

In his history of Alaska broadcasting, Duncan claims that the BBI board over-managed operations, thereby hamstringing its manager. The evidence points in the opposite direction. First, close management was exactly the task with which BBI was charged through its articles of incorporation and in keeping with the AEBC philosophy of local control. A laissez-faire approach would have played into the control mechanisms characteristic of Caucasian-oriented policies so common in the region prior to the 1960s and whose legacy was still so strong. For example, in 1968 Yup'ik Eskimos comprised more than 85 percent of Bethel's population but its city council was nearly all Caucasian and most of its meetings were conducted in English, despite the fact that this disenfranchised a good share of the Elders.

The Caucasian editor of the *Kuskokwim Kronicle* maintained that the firing of the manager was a "travesty" because the "majority of the programming prior to the coup was Upik oriented" (September 8, 1971, 4). While content is not unimportant, the more basic question is who was in control? As Michaels maintains, "aboriginal content" cannot be defined in the abstract. Culture, he reminds us, is not about skin colour or blood type, but about communication and the maintenance of tradition, so that content becomes "aboriginal" only when the means of communication become the aboriginals' media (1994, 44-45).

Recent Assessments of KYUK's Contributions

By the mid-1970s, KYUK had a Native general manager and at least five announcers who could speak Yup'ik. However, getting Native speakers had not been easy. Volunteers had filled news positions off and on since the station's start, but John Active, a Yup'ik news director hired in 1974, found himself constantly struggling to keep them. Our conversations with former members of the board revealed that keeping Yup'ik programming on the air has been a formidable challenge. One long-time board member, Paul Gregory, maintained that it was his understanding in the early days that 75% of the air-time would be either traditional Yup'ik or educational programming, but that over the last few years, it has become more and more Gussak (a term derived from "Cossack" used to refer to Caucasians) (P. Gregory 1997).

Over the years, Yup'ik-speaking journalists sought to provide culturally relevant broadcasts. Alexie Isaac, a newscaster with a wide range of audio and video production experience at KYUK over a 20-year period, explained to us that Western news stories made little sense to Elders, because they were too fast and because the Elders were used to stories that built up gradually and that then had endings (Isaac 1997). Throughout his career at KYUK, Isaac has sought to counteract a growing presumption among the Elders that what they have to say no longer matters. He does so by interviewing Elders about topics that interest them — "Arctic survival tips, family values, old stories" (Bethel Broadcasting 1991).

Similarly, Peter Twitchell, who was hired as a news translator in 1971 and remained at KYUK for twenty-three years, explained to us how the radio station was bound to the cultural life of the community:

So I was making sure that we had a lot of voices because I think radio is about a lot of voices. It's not just my voice, or Alexie's voice, but many voices. . . . Our values are different . . . the way we look at things is different. Our streams are full of fish. You walk on the tundra and there is growth: berries, moss, roots. You respect that. You can look at the tundra and say, "Hey, there's nothing here. Just flat tundra." But there's food under there; there's food seasonally. We got our moose, our birds, our bears, our birds. That's our culture. Very simple, but hard to understand. So we have to get our rights to subsistence respected. We're pretty lucky because I just have to jump in my boat to go get my dinner (Twitchell 1997).

Twitchell's Yup'ik broadcasts were appreciated by the Elders. Because of their positive reception and the importance of the language to Yup'ik culture, Twitchell and his fellow radio workers vowed to do even more cultural programming:

We said, "Our Elders are dying with all this wisdom. Since time immemorial, Elders have instructed us: how to live, how to survive. And they're dying with all this knowledge." So we decided to get some monies to go out and record the stories and the mores and just profile some of our Elders (Twitchell 1997).

Twitchell collected more than five-hundred profiles, stories, and recordings of Native folkways from villagers throughout the region, most of which have been aired on KYUK. Twitchell maintains that this knowledge is an invaluable oral record for a people who suffer from an identity crisis and for whom ancestral knowledge about the land and subsistence is still vital.

As KYUK moved into the oil-prosperous years of the early 1980s, it fared extremely well. However, two events profoundly shook community radio in Alaska. The first

was the ascendancy of national conservative forces with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Consistent with Reagan's philosophy of privatisation, Congress cut support for public broadcasting by 20% for the biennium beginning in 1983 (Engelman 1996, 102-103). Secondly, public broadcasting in Alaska was shaken by the world-wide plunge in oil prices. By 1985, oil prices were at one-third of their 1982 levels. With declining tax revenues, Governor William Sheffield proposed eliminating public broadcasting from the State's budget in 1986. Public broadcasting survived the decade only because its community orientation gave it a solid political base.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have described public broadcasting in Alaska as community-oriented, a term which distinguishes between federal forms of public broadcasting associated with mainstream expression and highly local forms of broadcasting rooted in decentralised and participatory forms of cultural expression (Engelman 1996, 6, 67-68). While these two forms are not mutually exclusive, they clearly articulate ideological frameworks for understanding the future of public broadcasting in Alaska. The federal form subscribes to a Western pluralist model of broadcasting advanced by National Public Radio mission statements and programming standards which accept the individual as the basic unit of analysis (Engelman 1996, 89-92). This individualism is couched in the provision of "neutral information," tacitly assuming acceptance of advanced capitalism and the individual consumer options made available under it by the professional norms of its practitioners (see Curran 1991, 100). To highlight differences between these two models of public broadcasting, let us examine how funding problems have been dealt with in the 1990s and ask how things might be handled differently.

When the Republicans swept the 1994 national, mid-term elections, their "Contract with America" contained a provision for eliminating federal funding for public broadcasting (Engelman 1996, 3). In Alaska, legislators had been slicing state support for public broadcasting since the governor's call for its elimination in 1986. Between 1986 and 1994, state funding decreased by 40%, and federal funding by 18% (Public Broadcasting Endowment Trust Fund 1994, 3). APBC commissioners had to deal strategically with a real crisis, and they reviewed what they called a "panoply of alternatives for reorganising the system" (APBC 1994, 1). In response to another 50% cut in 1995, the APBC devised plans for a satellite interconnection project, whereby stations would receive programme streams they could "mix and match" to produce an ersatz version of local service. The project was approved and funded by a 1995 grant from the US Commerce Department's Public Telecommunications Facilities Program, although as of late 1997, it was not yet operational.

Additionally, the APBC mandated that stations organise into regional networks, with all state funding channelled through these networks. The largest region, the Alaska Associated Public Broadcasting Stations, comprises 11 stations, including those of Bethel, Barrow, and Kotzebue. Inasmuch as Yup'ik and Inupiaq are mutually unintelligible languages, shared programming will have to be in English. Furthermore, the delivery of information over an electronic superhighway to physically dispersed receivers is a classic example of what Carey (1989) criticises as a transmission model of communication. The unidirectional movement of packaged cultural goods has nothing

in common with communicative forms that revolve around collective interaction.

To their credit, APBC members have recognised and acknowledged the grave threat to localism posed by restructuring (APBC 1996, 1). But the question such adaptations raise is how far can one take a medium down an instrumentally-driven highway before it loses its cultural *raison d'être*? We have argued that through community radio, Yup'ik citizens have played an intimate part in their image- and discursive-making practices. Recognising the political and cultural inflection of this discursive process, we need to ask what political forms are amenable to Alaska Native groups and their ideologies of sharing?

We began this article with Oswalt's assertion that by the 1970s, Yup'iks were "bashful no longer." Throughout Alaska, sovereignty movements gained momentum in the 1980s as Native groups recognised that the Native Claims Settlement Act spoke with an accent of cultural assimilation and termination, as it transformed indigenous peoples into shareholders. In 1992, 138 villages formed the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council to provide a unified voice for tribal governments (McBeath and Morehouse 1994, 278). And in 1994, the Alaska Natives Commission documented the cultural breakdown in rural Alaska, recommending tribal status as the blueprint for change. The movement toward sovereignty suffered a setback in February 1998, when the US Supreme Court reversed a lower court's decision that had accorded the Athabascan village of Venetie the status of Indian Country. Nevertheless, many Alaska Native leaders had affirmed months earlier that a Supreme Court reversal would not shake their resolve (*Anchorage Daily News*, July 5, 1997).

In short, if Native community radio is to engage cultural politics fairly and consistently, then it must be organised in forms which do justice to Native cultural persistence. As Carey puts it in his ritual view of communication, what is at stake is not the extension of messages in space so much as it is the maintenance of society in time. What is meaningful are those practices that draw persons together in fellowship and commonality (1989: 43). As intractable as funding problems may seem, we think it is imperative to begin with a position of political justice. For the Yup'ik and other Alaska Natives, this would mean a restoration of local control over their media so that they can carry on their oral traditions with radio serving as a metaphorical *qasgiq*.

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