



LISTENING TO NATIVE RADIO

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Community-based radio is vitally important to Native Americans in the United States. These radio stations broadcast programs that meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve, such as news about tribal politics, educational programming, programming related to health and other vital aspects of daily living, and perhaps most importantly, programming that seeks to preserve and perpetuate indigenous languages, histories, cultures and values. Reflecting on listening to indigenous radio both tells us more about the ways radio creates community and it tells us more about the diverse cultural positions of indigenous audiences. Through an analysis of listener feedback and related data from two Native-owned community radio stations in Minnesota (KKWE and KOJB), alongside an analysis of my own listening to these stations, I seek to identify the “communities” built by these stations.

LISTENING TO INDIGENOUS RADIO IN HISTORY

Native community radio in the United States was born out of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ in the 1960s, more specifically the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (Daley & James, 2004). The OEO’s main aims were to put local communities in control over programs designed to lift them out of poverty (Daley & James, 2004). In response, a group of Alaskan Native leaders called for improvements to their communities that included an indigenous-controlled radio station (Daley & James, 2004).

Through the cooperation of local and state leaders, such an indigenous-controlled station, KYUK-AM serving Bethel, first went on the air in May 1971. The station was intended to serve as an educational resource, as well as a means to preserve the culture and language of the Yu’pik people. From its beginning, the station emphasized its connection to the communities it served, incorporating bilingual greetings in Yu’pik and English at the beginnings of broadcasts (Daley & James, 2004), spreading community announcements, and even featuring a program called ‘Eskimo Story Hour’, where local stories were broadcast (Daley & James, 2004). While KYUK was the first publicly owned indigenous community radio station in the US, other stations including KYUK, WYRU from North Carolina, KMDX from Arizona, and KTDB from New Mexico also lay claim to being the ‘first’ Native-owned radio station in the United States (Downes & Gray, 2009; Keith, 1995). Other stations established during the 1970s and 1980s include the Navajo stations

KTDB and KTNN, KEYA in North Dakota, KSUT in Colorado, and KINI on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota (Keith, 1995).

Native-owned radio stations have clearly withstood these challenges and have spread across the United States. For example, the National Museum of the American Indian's website states that there are about 70 Native-owned radio stations in the US as of August 2013, with a majority of them located in the Western United States and in Alaska (Berryhill & Rubin, 2013). Many of the stations maintain a commitment to serving the needs of their communities. For example, KYUK still broadcasts a vast majority of its programming in the Yu'piik language, with programming that is specifically produced locally and is catered to its community (Keith, 1995). Indigenous languages are also a focus of many stations with many Native-owned radio stations serving as a way to help preserve and pass along languages among groups (Smith & Cornette, 1998). KYUK's Yu'piik broadcasts were cited as a reason why the language is still spoken today (Keith, 1995). Native-owned radio stations also provide an outlet for indigenous singers and musical groups to broadcast their music, giving both themselves and their music exposure (Smith & Cornette, 1998). These aspects paint a picture of indigenous community radio as flourishing and resilient, much like the peoples that it serves.

LISTENING TO CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS RADIO: CREATING MULTIPLE GEOGRAPHIES OF COMMUNITY

Thomas Biolsi helps us understand the kinds of geographies of community, which then can be applied to contemporary Native radio. Two useful geographies that Biolsi mentions are the spaces within where Native American tribes assert their sovereignty, which is within the boundaries of their reservations across the United States (Biolsi, 2005), alongside the second which exists off tribal reservations into areas where tribes either enjoy off-reservation treaty rights or assert their right to assist state/local authorities in preserving and protecting resources used by both the state and tribes (Biolsi, 2005). We can view this as *tribally-specific community*, tied to individual tribes through governmental control and treaty rights. Another geography that Biolsi covers is a "hybrid" geography, where Native Americans are both citizens of their tribal nations, as well as citizens of the United States, and can advocate for their issues as American citizens, as well as tribal citizens (Biolsi, 2005). This, of course, places them in a 'community' with non-tribal American citizens. I choose to focus on these two 'communities' for my analysis.

LISTENING TO INDIGENOUS RADIO TODAY: KOJB AND KKWE

The best way to ascertain how the broadcasts and programming that is provided by indigenous radio stations can help the foster community is to analyze their audience reach, as well as their programming. This article focuses the stations KOJB, based out of Cass Lake, Minnesota, and KKWE, based out of Callaway, Minnesota. These stations, alongside 16 other community radio station (both Native-owned and non-Native) comprise Ampers, a statewide community radio network (Ampers, 2018).

KOJB is owned and operated by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, broadcasting a mix of musical, news and cultural programs that air 24/7 (KOJB, 2018). KOJB operates under a non-profit status, with a mission of not only serving the Leech Lake reservation with programming that preserves and enhances the language, history and culture of the Ojibwe people, but also serves to “increase intercultural competency” among all residents of the broadcast area, which stretches over several counties in north central Minnesota and includes both tribal and non-tribal citizens (KOJB, 2018). Although official listener ratings are not available for KOJB, Minnesota state legislative reports state that the station’s Facebook page was ‘liked’ by over 2,900 people, up from 1,600 in 2015 (Ampers, 2015, 2018).

KKWE (branded as “Niiiji Radio”) is owned and operated by the White Earth Nation. Independent of formal control by the White Earth tribal government (KKWE, 2018), the station brings local to world news to the reservation. It provides educational and informational programming, it preserves the culture and history of the Ojibwe people that live on the reservation. The station notes that it serves as the only independent public broadcaster for its region, which includes nearly 30,000 people (KKWE, 2018). Official listener ratings are not available for KKWE; however, state legislative reports state that in 2016 and 2017, nearly 2,000 people attended events hosted by KKWE that were funded through Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage funding, alongside live coverage of pow wows that reached 3,000 people (Ampers, 2017, 2018). The station’s Facebook page currently has over 3,800 followers (Ampers, 2018).

In order for a native radio station to construct a ‘community’, a potential listener must make a connection with one dimension of programming.

CONSTRUCTING AND PRESERVING A TRIBALLY SPECIFIC COMMUNITY

Community radio stations function primarily, as the name states, to serve their communities. Therefore, a tribal radio station would likely focus the bulk of its programming towards meeting the needs of the tribe. A listener living on the Leech Lake Reservation will want to know community events that are occurring in Cass Lake or elsewhere on the Leech Lake Reservation, such as in Bena, or Ball Club. If they are interested in cultural or educational programming, they will want to listen to programming focusing on the Ojibwe people. This is tribal specificity or the idea that each tribal nation represents its own sovereign entity, not to be combined into a homogenous “Native American” identity.

Reports to the Minnesota state legislature about the programming and reach of KOJB and KKWE, combined with my own experiences during periods of passive listening to these stations, can tell us much about the construction of this ‘sovereign community’.

KOJB has produced a variety of programming that focuses on the Leech Lake area and its Native American/Ojibwe background over the last few years, including programs such as “Living the Ojibwe Way of Life” and “The Ojibwemowin, Learning the Ojibwe Language”, programs that tie directly into the language, culture and traditions of the Ojibwe people who call the Leech Lake Reservation and the surrounding area home (Ampers, 2014, 2017). Listener surveys conducted since 2014 by KOJB show the strong support these programs enjoy among their audience; “Living the Ojibwe Way of Life” was cited by between 38 and 65 percent of listeners surveyed as a favorite program on KOJB, while “The Ojibwemowin” was consistently rated as the most popular program on KOJB, consistently being named by 80% of listeners as

their favorite program on the station (Ampers, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). As one Leech Lake Band member stated, “To be able to turn on the radio station to KOJB-FM and hear the voices and stories of Leech Lake members is phenomenal (Ampers, 2016, p. 64).”

Even in my own listening to KOJB during a more banal time period, I found that the station stayed true to its mission of serving the Leech Lake Ojibwe community in unique ways that were not always programmatically related. Small things such as a morning show titled “The Rez Morning Show with Marie Rock” highlighted the “Ojibwe-ness” of the station. A short commercial acknowledged the station’s sponsor, the Leech Lake Gaming Division—not something you would hear on a non-Native station. Another commercial/public service announcement announced the “Ojibwe phrase of the day”. Periodic weather reports focused specifically on the Leech Lake area.

The same focus on tribal specificity can be applied to KKWE. Programming focusing on the White Earth and larger Ojibwe community broadcast on KKWE in recent years includes “Dibaajimowin/Storytelling”, a program that features Ojibwe oral traditions, and “Gichi Aya’aag Blizindaw ya/Elders Speak: Listen to Them”, which featured White Earth elders and other elders from Ojibwe reservations in Minnesota speaking on their experiences witnessing the changes that Ojibwe people have gone through (Ampers, 2015, 2017).

During my time listening to KKWE, the local and tribal connections made themselves apparent. The station identified itself as broadcasting from the White Earth reservation. A commercial advertised a forum to be aired on the station featuring candidates taking part in the upcoming White Earth tribal council election. The station provided information on a meeting for elders of the White Earth Community, and also broadcast a commercial for the White Earth Nation’s Shooting Star Casino. A public service announcement warned against the dangers of drinking while pregnant and its contribution to fetal alcohol syndrome. Even in the monotony of advertisements and stationidents, the community-focused nature of the station was clear.

CONSTRUCTING A “HYBRID” COMMUNITY

Both KKWE and KOJB inhabit geographies that are inhabited by more than just Ojibwe tribal members. Therefore, these stations serve an overall larger community that includes both tribal and non-tribal inhabitants, a “hybrid community”, where non-Native listeners represent a population that is served by the programming that KKWE and KOJB produce. Ideally, this community would be one where non-tribal citizens learn more about the Native people that they live alongside, increasing cooperation and understanding. Listener feedback for both stations yields much insight into how this “hybrid community” is formed.

In many cases, “community” is formed through the exposure of non-Native audiences to Native culture through programming. “To understand the true history of our people and to share that history in a public manner creates stronger and healthier relationships in our entire region,” stated a Leech Lake band member as to the positive benefits that KOJB broadcasting provides towards Ojibwe-White relations on and around the Leech Lake reservation (Ampers, 2016, p. 64). “Love the local, place-based programs. Want to learn more Ojibwe,” said another listener (Ampers, 2018, p. 70).

KKWE provides a similar benefit to its broadcast area, both in its on-air programming and through its sponsorship of events. “I never thought I’d listen to your station, but when we started coming to [a local KKWE-sponsored event], we started listening. My boys like to learn

about [Native Americans]. We never understood anything good about them,” stated one KKWE listener in their feedback (Ampers, 2017, p. 69). Local artists from the area, Ojibwe and non-Native, have been able to increase their visibility through KKWE’s programming: “My sister Rachel really got her start with the ‘New Artists on Air Show’. This year, she played at the [Minnesota] State Fair (Ampers, 2018, p. 70).”

In some cases, the inclusion of ‘non-Native’ broadcasting can help draw in non-Native listeners, as well as provide a broader base of cultural and musical programming to the entire listener base. KKWE’s broadcast of musical events at a historical theater in a nearby off-reservation town drew acclaim from many listeners. “Both my husband and I enjoy the Historic Holmes Theater program. We enjoy hearing what’s coming up and we use it to decide what shows we will attend,” stated one listener (Ampers, 2015, p. 57). Even artists from areas geographically distant from White Earth are brought in, exposing their music to KKWE’s listeners: “I never heard of a station that gives so much opportunity to artists, you are cool. I hope to perform at another one of your art and music celebrations,” said a musician from Central Minnesota (Ampers, 2017, p. 75).

In my listening to KOJB and KKWE, I found that while many programs on the stations did emphasize their “Ojibwe-ness”, this was not exclusively so. News programming on KKWE brought stories from around the country, with stories concerning both Ojibwe and non-Native listeners, such as the then-presidential candidacy of Donald Trump. KOJB’s news programming brought more Minnesota-specific news, such as a man being hit by a train in the southeastern portion of the state, the results of the recent ‘Super Tuesday’ presidential primaries, and a well-known Dairy Queen in Moorhead opening back up for the season. KOJB’s weather provided a forecast for the region, which would likely be heeded by listeners, whether they were Ojibwe or not. Musical selections also provided a mix between what would be considered ‘Native’ music and ‘non-Native’ music (although I can assure you that we Ojibwe are fond consumers of many different genres!). KOJB provided a steady stream of 80s pop music and a few contemporary songs. KKWE broadcast a non-stop variety of country music (likely well appreciated in northwestern Minnesota) during the daytime, switching to rock, blues, electronica, and the occasional drum music during the night time hours. On these two stations, there was something from everyone, and in a community of Ojibwe and non-Native people living together, this can be enough to draw people in.

CONCLUSION

Through my analysis of the broadcasts of two Native community radio stations, I have sought to explain the potential communities that these stations could construct, one that is tribally specific, and one that brings both Native Americans and non-Natives together through the power of radio. Feedback from listeners, along with my own analysis of my listening to these stations suggest that these two communities can, and likely do exist among the listeners of KOJB and KKWE. These potential “communities” are not just specific to KOJB and KKWE and likely exist around the United States, whether it is through Native-owned radio stations or other community radio stations. Whatever their geographic location may be, and whatever audiences they serve, the ability of these community radio stations to bring people together in the name of inter-cultural cooperation and acceptance only serves to support and perpetuate

their primary aims of the preservation of Native American cultures, histories and artistic works, so that future generations may enjoy them.

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