

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Signals in the Air: Native Broadcasting in America. By Michael C. Keith.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zj5r6vc>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Heil, Douglas

Publication Date

1996-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Signals in the Air: Native Broadcasting in America. By Michael C. Keith. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1995. 177 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

The ongoing series of movies produced by Turner Network Television on Native American history illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of telling native stories through mainstream media. On the plus side, the seven-million-dollar budget dedicated to each project ensures the best possible talent (Graham Greene, Wes Studi, Irene Bedard) and the best available crews. The result is well-written, well-acted, and highly cinematic storytelling that gets seen by a large number of people. (At the time it premiered, T.N.T.'s *Geronimo* was the highest-rated nonsports event ever shown on cable.) Each of these films has also been released on video, further expanding viewership. *Geronimo*, for example, has averaged close to one hundred rentals at each of three video rental stores in largely Caucasian Oshkosh, Wisconsin. And since each film in the series is coproduced by Native American Hanay Geiogamah with an all-native cast and a 50 percent-plus native crew, genuine aspects of native culture are integrated into each film.

On the minus side, all of the films to date have been written, directed, and photographed by Caucasians, leaving natives—except for Geiogamah—in subordinate crew positions. In essence, each film is made on mainstream terms for a mainstream audience. As a result, native history can get reshaped through mainstream dramatic form. In *Geronimo*, for example, good Apaches slaughter bad Mexicans just the way good whites used to slaughter bad Apaches. Past or present, the good guys fight for wives and children; the bad guys seemingly have no family and are free to die without consequences. The location filming of *Lakota Woman* was particularly contentious—in part because recent native history had again been accommodated to mainstream form. Locals protested that the cultural and religious significance of events had been minimized while the conventional good versus bad conflict was unfair and simplistic. In short, even the most conscientious of mainstream projects on native history ended up causing frustration and controversy due to a fundamental clash of cultures.

Is there an alternative to working through the mainstream? In his intriguing book *Signals in the Air: Native Broadcasting in America*, Michael C. Keith offers a persuasive Yes. Simultaneously a history

and a forum, *Signals in the Air* examines the encouraging growth of native-owned and operated broadcast stations over the past twenty-five years.

Keith particularly excels at detailing the social and political factors that have led to a rise in native broadcasting. He explains the significance of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, in which the U.S. government provided encouragement for natives to start their own governments and communities. After a post-war regression to an assimilation philosophy, Washington again began to support native empowerment in the early 1960s. In particular, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1965 helped encourage economic self-determination.

Keith also discusses the importance of Pacifica Radio, the emergence of taxpayer-supported public broadcasting (National Public Radio) in 1970, the takeover of Alcatraz in 1969, the philosophical contributions of AIM during the 1970s, and the initiation of the Minority Station Startup process in 1978 by the National Telecommunications Information Agency and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. As a result of these influences, the first noncommercial public station affiliated with a tribe began broadcasts in May 1971, and others soon followed. Today more than thirty stations are native owned and operated.

Keith also offers an astute analysis of financial issues involved in native broadcasting. He explains how the public broadcasting initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s, in combination with an insufficient economic base for advertisers, has resulted in virtually all of the native-owned stations being noncommercial. He examines how the 40 percent cutback in CPB funding during the Reagan and Bush era has slowed the growth of new native stations while the shift in policy from tax-supported public radio to listener and corporate underwriting has imperiled existing native stations. He also explains why the limited number of native-owned television stations is again attributable to economic factors.

One of the most interesting—and successful—aspects of the book is Keith's willingness to share space with native broadcast professionals. Speeches, marketing studies, survey responses, and interview observations are all included in the mix, giving the book an immediacy. The combination of these primary sources and Keith's substantive scholarship (which includes 322 footnotes and a recommended reading list of thirty-three titles) results in an unusually accessible book that can serve both college courses and industry professionals.

The centerpiece of *Signals in the Air* is a long chapter offering an inside look at each of the native public broadcasting stations. Each station is largely described by its station manager and/or program director, with Keith adding clarifications or additional insights where needed. Much of the information in this chapter is both inspiring and useful. In North Dakota, for example, the construction of the Garrison Dam during the 1950s forced the federal government to scatter (to poorer country) the three affiliated tribes of the Hidatsa, the Mandan, and the Arikara. According to KMHA-FM station manager Nina Fox, this upheaval destroyed cultural identity and triggered demoralization and alcoholism. KMHA was created largely as a means of restoring identity and community.

Clearly, it is succeeding. KMHA's ambitious programming includes five community reports a day (detailing tribal news, health information, and upcoming cultural activities), local cultural programs about the three tribes, and Native American music from across the country. A recent Memorial Day fundraising event broadcast personal honor songs composed on behalf of local war veterans. Fox explains that these songs "are cherished by the individual and his family and can be sung only by the one who composed the song or by the drum group that knows the honor song and only at the request of the honored individual or his family. . . . This was the first time such songs have been rendered for broadcast. . . . We realized that these personal honor songs can be forgotten if they aren't repeated" (p. 84). Endeavors by other stations have been equally noteworthy. Anthropologists have credited the bilingual programming on KYUK-AM/FM in Bethel, Alaska, as a prime factor in keeping the Yup'ik language alive. And financially strapped KABR-AM in New Mexico turns into a radio lab on Tuesdays and Thursdays so students of all ages can learn how to produce programming in Navajo as well as in English.

If there is a flaw in Keith's book, it is that at times the material seems to be haphazardly organized. A brief section on fundraising solutions is offered immediately before detailing the problem of funding for native stations, which he then circles back to three chapters later. An interesting section on the distrust between native and Anglo stations is tacked onto the end of the chapter on funding. Profiles of commercial native stations are also placed in the funding chapter instead of in the subsequent one, which is subtitled "The Native Stations." This might make sense if their

focus were on advertising as a funding source, but the emphasis instead is on audience and formats, which makes the profiles seem misplaced. As a consequence, flow and momentum are impeded.

This one reservation aside, *Signals in the Air* is a valuable book that will help any community planning to create or upgrade a minority radio station. Keith is admirably forthright about the many obstacles in the way of native broadcasting, including lack of money, inadequate staffing and training, and tribal interference. Nonetheless, the book remains positive in its outlook. Keith and many native broadcasters make much of the potential of American Indian Radio on Satellite (AIROS). Initiated in 1994, AIROS beams native programming to station affiliates on a daily basis. As a result, native programming is now available to stations too poor to produce much of their own. Significantly, it also bridges tribal communities, reinforcing a sense of native identity. "In many respects, it is the key to the future of native broadcasting," states broadcast engineer Alex Looking Elk (p. 127). Fortunately, this optimism has not been misplaced. In the months since *Signals in the Air* was written, affiliate membership has grown to a current count of thirty-five stations, with twenty stations having downlink capabilities. According to John Gregg, assistant manager and program director for the AIROS network, AIROS has increased programming from thirty-five hours in May 1996 to 113 hours in August—with up to five hours of programming per day (beginning at 1:00 p.m. eastern time). Meanwhile, the NAPBC—which houses AIROS in Lincoln, Nebraska—has been rechristened Native American Public Telecommunications because of its expanding range of activities. It continues to distribute educational programming on Native Americans through Vision Maker Video; it is involved in helping launch the American Indian Higher Education Consortium Distance Learning Network; and, over the past year, it has begun publishing an eight-page quarterly newsletter titled *The Vision Maker*. In short, the future has never looked brighter.

Perhaps the spirit of this book is best captured in the following comment by Dave Kellar, program director at WOJB-FM:

In summation, WOJB is a lot like the other members of NFCB—broke. The money thing. There's never enough—not for programming, not for equipment, and not for personnel. We're among the working poor, but we're smiling. Maybe

because sometimes we actually do something here that makes a difference, for the good. (p. 78)

Douglas Heil

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Spanish Expeditions into Texas, 1689–1768. By William C. Foster. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. 339 pages. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Spanish Expeditions into Texas is a most valuable reference work regarding many aspects of the period of early Spanish expeditions into Texas, its inhabitants, its rivers, and its flora and fauna. The book encompasses eleven expeditions from the late seventeenth century to 1768.

Leaders of the Spanish expeditions were required to keep diaries; others who were not required to keep diaries did so as well. They described what they saw during each day's travel and identified or named the streams crossed and campsites used. They also stated the direction followed and estimated the number of leagues traveled each day. Diarists named and described the Indian tribes they encountered as well as the animals, trees, shrubs, landmarks, and weather.

Foster's purpose was to trace as accurately as possible the route each expedition followed. Since later parties followed at least part of the route of earlier ones, it was possible to compare information given in the diaries to contemporary topographic maps to verify the landmarks noted. The routes and campsites used on successive tours were then identified on U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps to check the accuracy of distance estimates between rivers and camp locations and to verify the reports of heavily wooded areas. Aerial photographs and on-site inspections enabled Foster to ascertain sites even in remote regions.

The diaries required for each expedition provide the main source for determining routes. Diaries had to be signed under oath and attested by at least two responsible members of each party. On six of the eleven expeditions more than one diary was kept, and these additional diaries provided information for cross-checking the directions and distances traveled daily and for identifying campsites.

Because translators occasionally omitted one or more daily entries, the author had to consult manuscript copies to learn the