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TELEVISION/RADIO

TELEVISION/RADIO; Indian Country Sends A Stronger Signal

By CATHERINE C. ROBBINS

FIRST MESA, Ariz.— THE opening day in December of KUYI-FM had a singular flavor, a contemporary American Indian mix of traditional songs and prayers with 21st-century technology and plenty of hospitality. As Hopi women filled a table with trays of cookies, dozens of Indian and white well-wishers, including teenage volunteers from the nearby high school, spilled out of the small reception room into the broadcast studio and the dirt yard outside.

A collection of photos tacked on a large bulletin board documented KUYI's progress: a bare acre of dirt; the station -- a prefabricated building the size of a double-wide trailer -- still on its wheels; equipment and supplies being moved in.

Standing before a microphone in the blazing sunlight on the station's front steps, Doran Dalton, the chairman of the Hopi Foundation, opened the first broadcast day of Indian country's newest radio station with a simple announcement: "You're listening to KUYI." Then Jimmy Lucero, a Hopi crier -- every reservation village has one -- stepped up to the microphone to shout the news, in Hopi.

Waiting to go on the air to bless the station, Harlan Nakala, the kikmongqwi, or chief and religious leader, of First Mesa, explained its significance: "We can give news to elderly Hopi that can't speak English. Some young don't speak Hopi, so now they can hear Hopi and not be ashamed."

The birth of KUYI was significant for the Hopi people and for American Indian radio, representing another triumph over difficult conditions in an industry that ignores Indian broadcasting. KUYI (88.1 FM) is just the 30th American Indian radio station in the United States; during 2001, three more are expected to go on the air in Montana and Arizona.

In addition to the stations, programs and documentaries by Indian producers are reaching a broader audience, largely through American Indian Radio on Satellite, the primary distribution system for Indian radio. Most visible is the popular "Native America Calling," a live national call-in show. The program links Indians and non-Indians from Alaska to Florida in "an electronic

talking circle," said Richard Towne, general manager of KUNM-FM, the National Public Radio station in Albuquerque, where the show originates.

Like many Indian stations, KUYI serves a remote reservation. Most of the 11,000 Hopis inhabit 11 villages on three broad mesas so isolated and daunting that the Hopis escaped domination and conversion by Spanish conquistadores and friars, allowing them to retain much of their traditional culture. The northeastern Arizona landscape is both dramatic and serene -- KUYI's call letters spell out the Hopi word for water, a sacred element on the arid 1.5 million-acre reservation.

Even today, negotiating the reservation's canyons can be a knuckle-whitening adventure. Similarly, launching a radio station was "a fantastic journey," said Loris Taylor, the president of the Hopi Foundation, a nonprofit organization that owns KUYI.

Not shown in the photographs on display were the technical, cultural and organizational gymnastics involved in getting KUYI on the air, such as the positioning of the antenna. Although the station has a powerful 69,000-watt signal, the reservation's unforgiving terrain is defined by deep canyons and mesas that rise to 6,500 feet above sea level.

NAILING down a site required reaching a consensus among the three villages that constitute First Mesa. After meetings were held with all the villages and permission was obtained from the Water Corn Clan, which owns the land, the tower was erected at 6,500 feet on Antelope Mesa. The mesa is just two miles from the station as the crow flies but 15 miles by road, of which five are rough dirt.

Aligning the studio and the antenna precipitated a small crisis, which was resolved by a teenager's bright idea. Normally they are aligned with lasers, which were not available at KUYI at the crucial moment. Marshall McKerchie, the 18-year-old son of Burton McKerchie, KUYI's Chippewa and Ottawa engineer, suggested using mirrors to align the two points with the reflections of the sun's rays. "It's ironic, because the sun is very important in Hopi culture," Burton McKerchie said.

Other barriers separate KUYI from listeners. For instance, Ms. Taylor's family is from Oraibi, an 800-year-old village whose residents have elected not to have running water or electricity. Once again, the sun helped. "My mom has a solar radio and can tune in," Ms. Taylor said.

Although the idea of a Hopi radio station had been germinating quietly on the reservation since the 1970's, two white men pushed it to the surface in the mid-1990's: Gerry Gordon, a reservation schoolteacher, and Dennis Murphy, a Los Angeles filmmaker. Mr. Murphy had first visited the Hopi to see ceremonial dances and later returned to pursue several projects, including making movies with Mr. Gordon's students.

About six years ago, Mr. Murphy was helping a veterinarian during calving season when he noticed that the Hopi ranchers were listening to KTNN-FM, the powerful Navajo station from

Window Rock, Ariz. The vet explained that it was the only station in the area with Indian-language programming, and the Hopis listened, even though they did not understand Navajo.

Mr. Murphy thought immediately about a Hopi radio station. He, Mr. Gordon and other interested people brought their idea to the Hopi Foundation, which was established in 1987 to find alternative ways to address issues like poverty, illiteracy and joblessness. When a survey showed that residents felt a radio station owned and managed by Hopis could help unify the reservation, the foundation moved ahead with the project. Money to establish KUYI came from the Hopi Foundation, the Department of Commerce, the Lannan Foundation, a membership drive, private contributors and even Hopi High School. Support also came from a group that has sometimes been in conflict with the Hopis: the Navajos. Jesse Thompson, a Navajo, represents the Hopi Reservation on the Navajo County Board of Supervisors. Although the Navajos and Hopis have been in a long and often rancorous land dispute, Mr. Thompson supported a \$10,000 county appropriation for the station. "This is the greatest gift for the Hopi people," he said.

Three years ago, the Hopi Foundation hired Susan Braine, who is Assiniboine and Sioux, for the push to get KUYI on the air. One of Indian radio's pioneers, Ms. Braine has managed or launched a half-dozen stations since 1979, which was only four years after the first Indian station went on the air from Ramah, N.M., on the Navajo Reservation. As the first manager of American Indian Radio on Satellite, she oversaw the network's first 100 hours of programming. Before taking on KUYI, she had been at Koahnic Broadcasting Corporation in Anchorage, the principal producer of Indian programming, where she also helped to launch Koahnic's station, KNBA-FM, the only urban-based Indian station.

The Federal Communications Commission had set a deadline of 3 a.m. Dec. 21 for KUYI to be on the air, or lose its construction permit; Ms. Braine beat the deadline by 15 hours. In a quiet moment on the opening day, she articulated what motivated the Hopis to climb over the many obstacles: "A very apparent realization of how fast the language is being lost and how fast the culture is changing with every generation."

As mass media chip away at Indian cultures, tribes have turned to radio to keep languages heard and spoken. Some Indian stations sprinkle their schedules with "Native Word of the Day" from Koahnic. Each 60- to 90-second spot is a vocabulary lesson in an Indian language. KUYI, broadcasting mostly in Hopi for 18 hours daily, "will have lots of words a day," Ms. Braine said.

Like most Indian stations, KUYI carries a mix of programming: mainstream and American Indian music, from drum groups to contemporary; information from tribal and village governments; syndicated national news in English; live coverage of high school basketball games, which Indians follow fervently; community bulletin boards. Also like many stations, KUYI carries the English-language "Native America Calling," which is celebrating its fifth anniversary.

For a recent program broadcast on the 110th anniversary of the massacre of Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee, S.D., the program's host, Harlan McKosato, asked his listeners: "Was this the end of the Indian resistance or the beginning of our ongoing struggle for autonomy and sovereignty?"

Pointed and emotional answers came back from listeners and from Mr. McKosato's Lakota guests, Alex White Plume, Rick Afraid of Hawk and Birgil Kills Straight, who spoke from Porcupine, S.D., in a phone hook-up arranged by KILI, the Lakota Sioux station.

"We don't look at it as a massacre, we view it as the killing of our relatives," Mr. White Plume said, bringing the discussion directly to the Indian view. Conventional histories describe Wounded Knee simply as the end of Indian resistance to colonization; guests and callers to "Native America Calling" repeatedly emphasized that the event ruptured Sioux families and traditional and religious values.

THE discussion redefined the event. Mr. Kills Straight spoke movingly of Sioux bodies dumped into mass graves, improperly buried, leaving survivors unable to mourn. Because so many spiritual leaders were among the dead, callers said, no one was left to lead the Lakota people to recovery. Religion, ceremonies, even language became victims.

A clearly distressed Navajo caller talked about forced marches that her people endured. "Sometimes we are numbed by them," she said. Then she pleaded for the tribes to come together and demand recognition of atrocities. "We're all educated now," she said. "We should know how to fight with words now."

"Native America Calling" doesn't always elicit such anger and sorrow. January's programs included a conversation on bridging the digital divide on reservations, with Gloria Tristani, an F.C.C. commissioner, and Julius Snell of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, who is installing computers and training tribal members in the Four Corners states, as the guests. Another program -- the monthly "Music Maker" edition -- featured the Hopi reggae artist Casper. "Native America Calling" has also covered indigenous movements in Cuba, Mexico, the Amazon and Canada.

For an installment called "Tales of Wonder," the Cherokee-Powhatan storyteller and linguist Gregg Howard related traditional Native American winter stories like "Rabbit and the Bear," about working together for the good of all, and "Little Turtle," about what happens when you try to be someone you're not. Listeners were invited to call in their favorite winter stories.

"Tales of Wonder" illustrated the subtle cultural protocols that Indian radio programmers must follow to maintain their credibility. In most tribes, storytelling is strictly a winter activity in which the elders tell the stories to teach youngsters about tribal traditions. To broadcast such a program in summer would be offensive to tribes. Also, many chants that have ceremonial religious purposes cannot be broadcast.

Like the local stations, "Native America Calling" transmits a large amount of sheer information. Every broadcast begins with a five-minute segment, "National Native News," produced by Koahnic Broadcasting. Once a month, the program sets aside a day for current events, such as the management of Indian trust funds, the case of the jailed activist Leonard Peltier or national political news affecting Indians.

"Native America Calling" is unmistakably activist and liberal, but Mr. McKosato, who is Sac and Fox, doesn't always toe the activist mark. "I don't buy that all Natives think holistically," he said. "We wouldn't have survived. I also don't buy that a long time ago Indians had it good and today Indians have it bad."

The size of the audience for "Native America Calling" is difficult to determine. An estimated 250,000 radios are tuned in each week to stations which carry the show, which is broadcast at 11 a.m. Mountain Standard Time on weekdays. About 50,000 people a month hear it on the Internet at www.nativecalling.org, and it is carried on two stations with a total audience of 242,000 -- including 50,000 Miskito Indians from Mexico -- by Radio Bilingue, a public radio network for Latinos based in Fresno, Calif.

For KUNM in Albuquerque, which broadcasts to central and northern New Mexico, "Native America Calling" is a major success, trailing only national and local news shows in audience numbers.

Despite growth, Indian radio remains a speck in the industry, however. Most stations reach tiny markets -- a single reservation or, in the case of KNBA in Anchorage, a small city. KTNN, the Navajo station in Window Rock, turns its 50,000-watt signal westward at night to reach listeners from the Bay Area to San Diego.

Despite offbeat and lively programming, most public radio stations, even in cities with significant Indian populations like Los Angeles, San Francisco and Phoenix, do not pick up national programs like "Native America Calling" and "National Native News." Indians are not seen as a desirable demographic for stations trying to reach professionals with household incomes above \$50,000 (although surveys at KNBA in Anchorage show that about 75 percent of its listeners are non-Indians). "Native America Calling" is a niche program, said Mr. Towne of KUNM, at a time when "most public radio stations have gone to seamless programming."

"Most of the big city stations have gone on a march of conformity and this doesn't match," he said.

Except for KTNN, which is a commercial station, Indian radio stations are publicly financed through tribes, grants and underwriting. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting channels federal money in two streams, to stations that meet certain criteria and to media groups that offer specific projects, like American Indian Radio on Satellite. In 2001, it will provide a total of \$2.3 million, mostly as matching grants, to 20 Indian stations. That is double the amount of a decade ago.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting also provides grants to Koahnic Broadcasting and to Native American Public Telecommunications, the principal distributor of Indian radio and television programming. (American Indian Radio on Satellite is one of its services.) Based at the University of Nebraska, N.A.P.T. distributes Indian radio programming on satellite and distributes video programming to public television stations. Koahnic, besides producing programs and operating its own station, runs a media training center for young Indians. The two nonprofit organizations are currently negotiating an agreement that will move ownership of "Native America Calling" from N.A.P.T. to Koahnic.

Gaming may become an important source of financing for Indian media. Frank Blythe, the executive director of N.A.P.T., is using his "old boy" ties among tribal chairmen to try to tap casino revenues. He said that casino managers did not know the potential of Indian radio and television, especially on the national level. Mr. Blythe said some Indians have criticized him for going after casino dollars. But, he said, "If you get the money, you get the money."

Despite its reach and popularity, "Native America Calling," which has an annual operating budget of about \$280,000, has not found enough underwriters to make it self-sufficient. The show has received corporate underwriting for just five weeks of its five-year existence, and no one is specifically designated for fund-raising. That record, Mr. McKosato said, is the show's "most visible weakness."

Nonetheless, Indian stations themselves continue to grow. They have gone beyond cultural preservation and are active listening posts for the communities they serve. They also provide indispensable, sometimes lifesaving public service, especially on sprawling reservations where phone service is inferior or nonexistent. During the winter, KILI in Porcupine, S.D., alerts Sioux communities about people -- and cattle -- that might be lost in snow storms.

National programming brings Indians and non-Indians to a common ground around the microphone and on the Web. Donald Lemieux, who is Chippewa, listens to "Native America Calling" almost every day from Anchorage. He said that "Native America Calling" reflects what the 500 tribes of American Indians share -- the continuing pain of oppression -- while telling the story of how Indians live in two worlds, the tribal and the broader cultures.

Describing "Native America Calling," Mr. Lemieux said, "It's the pulse of Native country."

Photos: On opening day at KUYI-FM, top, on the Hopi reservation, Burton McKerchie, at left above, and John Greeg Sr. tested the signal. (Photographs by Cary Herz for The New York Times)(pg. 33); Harlan McKosato broadcasting his live show "Native America Calling" at KUNM-FM in Albuquerque.; Harlan Nakala, center, saying a Hopi prayer as Doran Dalton of the Hopi Foundation and Susan Braine, KUYI-FM's manager, listen. (Photographs by Cary Herz for The New York Times)(pg. 34)

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