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Native American Images and the Broadcast Media

JAMES R. SMITH

In the last decade, scholars have increasingly focused their attention on media portrayals of North American Indians. Much of the interest has centered on the stereotyping of Indians and Indian cultures in the popular and fine arts. While scholars have noted a shift, in recent years, toward more favorable and realistic Indian images in the mass media, some are not as optimistic about achieving significant social gains in the near future. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., for example, maintains that some of the recent favorable images are a by-product of increased social awareness, but even the more sympathetic contemporary artists primarily view Indians "according to their own artistic needs and moral values rather than in terms of the outlook and desires of the people they profess to know and depict."[1] With regard to historical broadcast portrayals, this line of reasoning supports two main theses. First, that radio and television portrayals of Native Americans, with some exceptions, have paralleled earlier treatments in film and print. Second, that images and portrayals were also strongly affected by radio and television economics and program packaging requirements.

An investigation of Indians and broadcast seems warranted for two primary reasons. The majority of work on Indian images and stereotypes has concentrated on film, giving only passing mention to radio and television, which reach proportionately more individ-

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uals with the same content. Native Americans are becoming more involved in the broadcast media via participation in station ownership and program production, beginning to *use* the broadcast media to forward their own goals and present their perspectives, rather than being systematically *used* by the media to forward the cause of mass entertainment. In order to effectively position Indian broadcast images, with respect to other media, it would be fruitful to examine several key points regarding the development of broadcast programming.

The images and participation of Indians in popular media has followed a pattern consistent with traditional inter-media relationships. With regard to mass consumption, each medium has enjoyed a *golden era,* which somewhat overlaps the period of immense popularity of other media. Prior to the 1920s, the pulps, dime novels, and other print media dominated the market. In the 1930s and 1940s, both radio and film enjoyed considerable public attention, only to yield to television in the 1950s. Despite alarmist cries, the *older* media did not die; they simply found smaller segments within the mass audience and targeted their content to those segments. Because of cross-ownership, namely radio and television stations owned by newspaper or publishing companies, the media were systematically managed, to some extent, to complement each other.

With regard to program content, American media were and are notably symbiotic, frequently capitalizing on the success of another medium. Since the goal is generally to satisfy the largest audience possible, it is often considered expeditious to develop a movie, radio program, or television show from a successful book, magazine series, or play. Previous marketplace success not only provides an indication of public acceptance of the specific content, it also generates a core audience for subsequent versions of the story in other media. This practice of *borrowing* is also responsible, in part, for the rapid diffusion of stereotypes, developed in one medium, across other media.

John A. Price's work on Indian stereotypes in motion pictures provides a useful position from which to analyze Indian images in broadcast content. Price notes three basic developmental periods in film: (1) between 1908 and 1929, the era of silent moves, the western genre and negative Indian stereotypes were first developed; (2) between 1930 and 1947, in the sound dramas and serials, a heightened use and solidification of stereotyping Indians; and (3)

after 1948, the process of breaking down the stereotypes, resulting in somewhat more sympathetic portrayals.[2]

In terms of media symbiosis, the success of the dime novels in the mid-to-late 1800s and the wide acceptance of the Wild West shows of the late 1800s provided the first significant opportunity to capitalize on the popularly accepted images of the "savage" despite their inaccuracies. Logically, silent film producers adopted numerous western themes, with the Indian serving as foil for the white-oriented plot. The birth of the *western* genre was particularly significant since it set Indian media portrayals on a rapid stereotypical course, soon to be followed by other media. With the silent movie westerns already widely consumed by the American public, the sound versions permitted the thunder of hooves, the twang of arrows, and the verbal Indian, who was mainly limited to guttural and simplistic utterances or war cries. It was during the acknowledged rise of the sound westerns that radio, a fledgling medium, symbiotically adopted Indian themes, stereotypes, and even titles. Radio drama was advancing and the film industry supplied much fuel.

During the 1930s, network radio aired such programs as *Death Valley Days, Rin-Tin-Tin, The Lone Ranger,* and *The Tom Mix Ralston Straightshooters,* the majority of which found their way to television some twenty years later. With the last three programs noted, Indians were stereotypical inserts to provide a basis for action and resolution by the white heroes. Save for "Tonto," in *The Lone Ranger,* Indians were seldom the center of dramatic activity, but with exceptional frequency, as in the B-formula westerns, they were portrayed as threats and obstacles to peaceful westward expansion. Like their film counterparts of the era, radio Indians were almost exclusively played by white actors, for example, John Todd played the benign, but nevertheless stereotypical, Indian companion of the white, masked hero. Despite the criticism of the role of Tonto, it was indeed more "noble" than many of the film images. The program was associated with some of the higher ideals of American life, such as a firm stand against injustice and no smoking or drinking. In the early episodes of the program Tonto miraculously saved his childhood friend, John Reid, following an ambush by a white gang, hence underscoring inter-racial friendship, but also a sense of noble obligation.[3] The notion of Indian and white children growing together was to be repeated in later radio dramas, as a century previous in captivity narratives.

During this period, Indians were not the only minority group to encounter stereotypical exploitation. Much has been written about the early radio characterizations of Blacks, by white actors, most notable in *Amos and Andy*, which lasted well into the 1950s. It should also be pointed out that Asians experienced similar stereotyping problems. While Asian characters fared better in terms of having leading roles, it was surely a mixed blessing. The evil oriental lead in the *Fu Manchu Mysteries* of the 1930s provided an image direct from other media. This radio program followed closely the successful book and magazine serialization of Sax Rhomer's "Fu Manchu" character. Author Earl Derr Biggers was also to discover the benefit of media symbiosis, when in 1932 *Charlie Chan* aired on the NBC Blue Network. Chan later surfaced in cinema and television. While these two major characters somewhat off-set each other on the good-to-evil continuum, they also produced early social and linguistic stereotypes of orientals, in form not totally unlike those ascribed to Indians in the various programs. Again, as with Black and Indian characters, Asians were played by white actors.

These early Indian and Asian portrayals seem to reinforce the contention that in terms of marketplace success, viewing different cultures through a white perspective was not only expedient, but also profitable. The stereotypes were part of successful entertainment formulae, representing quantity rather than quality. In the case of radio, one and sometimes two 15 or 30 minute scripts had to be produced each week by writers, thus, another general force in the broadcast programming environment is time, *vis-a-vis* the demands of the schedule, which tend to limit even the most creative and precise writers.

By the 1940s, radio's thriller-western dramas yielded to the onset of the increasingly popular action-adventure dramas with crime and mystery themes. Aside from the ever-successful *The Lone Ranger* series, which was to run until 1955, only the masked man's direct competition had the combination of high ratings and a regular Indian character. In the early 1940s, *Red Ryder* actually bested *The Lone Ranger* in some of the early Hooper program ratings, and it was based on a popular *Los Angeles Times* comic strip and movie serial version. Red Ryder's radio entourage included his Indian ward "Little Beaver," played by several white child actors over the run of the show, who presented a rather innocent image of Indians, while suggesting that inter-racial friendship often becomes lasting via childhood experiences. According to

radio historian John Dunning, "Little Beaver's" classic line was "you betchum, Red Ryder."[4]

Until the late 1940s then, there were few major Indian characters on radio, and generally those playing supporting roles were stereotypically sympathetic, helping to off-set the folklore of mounted warriors rampaging through white settlements. At this point, it might be posited that radio westerns never reached the high level of stereotyping noted in the B-western films of the era, nor was radio as heavily saturated with the *Indian problem* as was film. Thus, in terms of volume and types of Indian portrayals, radio never systematically evidenced the first two stages noted in Price's analysis of the movies.

In many ways, the post-1948 era for radio almost capsulized all three of the film stages, with a slight emphasis on the more positive or sympathetic images. In terms of the regular programs of this latter period on radio drama, at least three involved Indian characters on a systematic basis. Again, the setting was the west. One of the ranch hands, "Harka," on *Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders*, circa 1949, was an Indian generally cast in a positive light. But, the most engaging situation was presented during that same period by a program called *Straight Arrow*. In this rather short-run drama the hero, Steve Adams, was a white raised among Comanches. When, as the introduction to the program touts, "danger threatened innocent people and when evil-doers plotted against justice," Adams the rancher vanished and was replaced by a "mysterious, stalwart Indian, wearing the dress and warpaint of a Comanche," to correct the wrongs.[5] Surely some might point to the immediate superficial stereotypes suggested by the above passage, but it also suggests that this program underscored positive aspects of Indian values and morality, while also alluding to direct experiential contact as providing a further method of understanding Indians and Indian cultures.

The short-lived *Dr. Sixgun*, another favorable program depicting Indians, aired during the 1954-1955 season. Traveling the "old Indian territory," this gun-packing physician was a friend and medical aide to white and Indian alike. A year later *Fort Laramie* was aired. This was a unique program about the everyday life at this Wyoming outpost, in which weather and boredom were greater enemies than hostile Indians. In contrast with the more sympathetic programs were shows like *Gunsmoke* of the early 1950s. In its more explicit episodes, standard *Gunsmoke* fare included "mutilated bodies left by Idians to rot on the plains, gunmen split

open by axes or knives, families burned-out and slaughtered."[6] Hence, during the 1950s Indian images in radio ranged from gory to noble glory.

As Raymond Stedman points out in his work on broadcasting's serial dramas, many of the cowboy heroes were clearly dedicated to law and order and many of them assumed some disguise to conduct their business.[7] In programs involving Indian characters on a regular basis, the Indians were generally allied with these white heroes and their ideals, but for the most part it was a white man's law. While radio may not have been as systematically damaging to the Indian image as film, radio failed to crystalize enough positive and accurate imagery to generate a counterforce of significance. The limited number of Indian actors in Indian roles, as in film, seemed more a product of the American talent system than the medium's. Furthermore, there were few, if any, Indians as *the* major character in these radio programs.

When interpreting the potential impact of these programs on their youthful audience, one cannot ignore medium conditions. Radio, as an aural-only medium, relies heavily upon words, dialects, and sound effects to suggest images of the action and setting. Radio drama listeners were not media isolates. They too frequented the movie theatres of the era and through those vivid images of film Indians could generate stereotypical mental pictures in response to radio's audio cues.

Television came of age in the 1950s, and with it came the conventions of the movie and radio westerns. This was logical for ties were already being made with the movie producers for television product, and the owners of the radio stations and networks were, in many cases, to become owners of television facilities. *The Lone Ranger, Cisco Kid, Death Valley Days,* and *Gunsmoke* crossed from their former media to the newer one. In the early days of television, as in the latter days of drama-oriented radio, the full gamut of wild Indian images and stereotypes were presented. During the mid-1950s to early 1960s, television too had several somewhat pro-Indian dramas, such as *Brave Eagle* and *Broken Arrow*. In each of these cases, Indian characters played more substantial speaking roles and were generally involved in each of the episodes. Although these shows included some Indian actors, which was a new development, Michael Ansara, a non-Indian, played Cochise in television's version of *Broken Arrow*. Like its film counterpart, television's *Broken Arrow,* and to some extent *Brave Eagle,* attempted to present Indian culture as a legitimate alternative. These programs also

showed dramatized versions of the obvious problems of intercultural and intracultural conflict.

The moral and dedicated Indian companion image also surfaced in television in two popular series. *The Lone Ranger* was simply transferred from film and radio to television, this time with Jay Silverheels as "Tonto." With a slightly different setting, but basically in the same formula, the *Yancy Derringer* series included X Brands as the speechless companion "Pahoo." Later, other programs, such as *Daniel Boone* and *Cade's County* were also to include Indian characters in supporting roles. Indian actors playing Indian roles made a comparatively early entry into this new medium; there is little doubt that some of those roles lacked accuracy and were prone to more subtle, yet obvious stereotyping.

By the late 1950s there were over 30 westerns on television, and the strongly negative stereotypes noted in earlier film and print media reappeared. The greatest image problem seemed to center on the specific genre of TV westerns that directly imported the plots and themes of the motion pictures of the era. In programs ranging from *Laramie* and *Wagon Train* to *Riverboat* and *Wanted-Dead or Alive*, Indians were positioned as savage, brutal, inept, and mystical. Indeed, it was stereotypical saturation. During the mid 1960s, comedic negative stereotypes were presented in the commercially successful *F-Troop*. In *F-Troop*, audiences saw images that included problems with alcohol and gross exaggerations of Indian lifestyles. Of course, the portrayals of pioneer whites in various roles were also grossly exaggerated.

By 1960 the saturation of negative stereotypes became so intense that the Native American population urged the Oklahoma Legislature to officially denounce the potential effect on American youth of "repetitious distortion of historical facts."[8] Shortly thereafter, the Association on American Indian Affairs in New York City instituted a campaign to improve the Indian image on television and in other media. While this attempt ended a year later, producing only negligible effects, the cluster of events during the early 1960s marks the first concentrated attempt by special interest groups to apply pressure on the media with regard to Indian portrayals. Throughout the 1960s, Native Americans and other majority groups became more involved in various hearings and protests, including one centering on a 1967 network series, *Custer*.[9]

The fate of these protests seemed to rest more with the program ratings than in the hands of the more socially aware executives in the commercial television industry. To some extent, as long as our

media remain dominantly commercial, social concern will be balanced by viewer acceptance and other marketplace factors. By the 1970s the western on television was in a clear decline and the classic genre, borrowed largely from film, had passed its prime time. The classic cowboy and Indian images only occasionally appeared in such dramatic pieces as *Little House on the Prairie*. The analysis of Indian images cannot cease with the passing of the classic western genre, other factors and media practices must be considered.

Compounding the television image assessment issue is the practice of airing major films, with some editing, on both local and network levels. The threatening savage images of such movies as *Stagecoach*, *Dual at Diablo*, and various Custer movies were somewhat countered by television's featuring *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Little Big Man*, and *A Man Called Horse*. Even films dating back to the 1930s receive occasional viewing. The airing of movies on television, in many respects, extends the audience size and in some cases extends the audience exposure across generations. When we consider a potential audience of over 100 million, the extensive capability of network television or a large number of individual stations is considerable. In effect, both the positive and negative films will have an extended TV audience as long as there is a demand for such product. This demand, since it is generally cheaper to buy the television rights for an older film or TV series than for newer productions, may continue for some time. Motion picture companies traditionally package a group of films for syndication to local television outlets, after their primary runs in the movie theatres, network television, and pay television are completed. Media practices and economics may play an important role in the survival of films involving Indian images, for better or worse.

Since television series are also syndicated, after their major network runs, we might expect *F-Troop*, *Daniel Boone*, *Grizzly Adams*, and even *The Lone Ranger*, despite their age, to continue to gain audiences, and hence have some social impact regarding their portrayal of Indians and Indian life. Future assessments of the impact of these early films and television programs on attitudes toward Native Americans must account for the role of program syndication in perpetuating images and stereotypes.

Another programming type, which may well include major Indian portrayals in the near future, is the mini-series. Wolper Productions has been preparing a serial version of Ruth Beebe Hills' *Hanta Yo* for network television. The book has generated considerable controversy. Bea Medicine, a Standing Rock Sioux

and anthropologist, maintains that while some Lakota people may find *their* story praiseworthy, she feels the "book is highly dangerous to the image of the Lakota people."[10] Overall, the criticism has taken two primary directions. First, critics have noted inaccuracies in Lakota speech and question the linguistic fidelity of *Hanta Yo*. Second, and more relevant to this discussion, critics have taken issue with the promotion of the book and presumably the visual version, as a factual Indian *Roots*. The normally apolitical Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium (NAPBC) has taken a position against presenting *Hanta Yo* as a definitive work, rather than a fictional work. In a letter directed to those involved with the video production, the NAPBC leaders stated they "can in no way condone or accept the decision by ABC-TV and Wolper Productions to produce *Hanta Yo* as an Indian Roots."[11] Considering the development and alteration of the image of the Native American in broadcast programming over the past 50 years, this mini-series controversy introduces a new set of concerns. It seems necessary to note that broadcast portrayals, for the most part like their film counterparts, grew more sympathetic and more accurate, partially because of the passing of the classic western genre and a slightly increased level of social awareness in both the industry and the audiences. In the earlier years, Native American studies and culture did not have the visibility and support evidenced in the last decade. While images and stereotypes are still of considerable interest, the added dimension accuracy of portrayal, within a more sympathetic context, has become a newer concern for both the public and the media, indicating some social progress in this regard.

This analysis has presented a brief overview of the images of Indians in broadcast programming and the attending media business and production factors. Some preliminary generalizations seem supported. First, the notion of media sharing content, hence imagery, has produced cross-fertilization of images via symbiosis. Second, the commercial broadcast media, by their very nature, tend to respond rather promptly to audience preferences. Broadcast audience preferences were clearly affected by contact with other media images of Indians. Radio and television portrayals of Indians tended to fall into two broad categories; the sympathetic portrayal, usually including an Indian as a somewhat noble associate to a white hero, and the classic negative portrayal, normally involving Indians cast as savage impediments to white existence in the west. Third, the pressures of scheduling, time, and economics, combined with the previously noted trends, produce a situation

less than conducive to presenting Indians and Indian cultures with fidelity. Finally, the counter-cultural use of the Indian, as noted by Price, Berkhofer, and others, which includes topics ranging from examinations of white-Indian policies to the presentation of Indian lifestyles as a rational alternative, has not surfaced in any major form in the regular network broadcasting schedules, save for some of the short-run dramas of early television.

Regarding the relationship of broadcast portrayals with those in other media, radio and television have presented a somewhat unique profile. One reason broadcasting did not fully fit the motion picture development categories noted by Price is that the western genre had a considerable longer and more stable existence in film. In terms of radio and early television, many of the portrayals were comparatively more sympathetic than film portrayals, but film seemed to show a clearer trend toward counter-cultural topics in later years. Unfortunately, by this time, the audience palate for western themes on TV was apparently satisfied. Television and radio, like film, generally used white actors to fill major Indian roles. The themes, as in print and cinema before, were cast in a white American hue; Indian cultures were interpreted through a white perspective.

While some analysts have suggested that early Indian stereotypes were politically expeditious, with regard to treaty manipulations and political justification, the broadcast portrayals seemed more directly influenced by economic and programming exigencies, rather than any manifest desire to denigrate the Native American.[12] Since the media are so affected by these exigencies, it seems unlikely that a true Indian perspective will be a dominant force in commercial broadcasting in the near future, unless that perspective coincides with public demand. If the images are to change toward the needs of Native Americans, then Native Americans may have to become more directly involved in the ownership and production processes.

There are indications that Indians are becoming involved. Recently, the NAPBC was formed. Its purposes are to provide video and film materials by, for, and about Native Americans on a national scale. The NAPBC, while concentrating on public television distribution, already has over twenty programs and series available, some by Indian producers. The organization hopes to extend its activities into the areas of training and production in the near future and has conducted an extensive survey of media capabilities among Native American populations.[13] Early in 1980, the American Inter-Tribal Radio Society (AIRS) was organized with the expressed

purpose of improving Indian radio development. Indian ownership of radio stations has increased over the last decade, particularly emphasizing public radio.

There are many implications for future research. This preliminary examination has suggested some inter-media differences with regard to Indian images, and further detailed research is needed to document and analyze more fully the images presented in radio and television programs. While this paper has concentrated on regular series programs, there also have been many one-shot productions, documentaries, and individual episodes in various other series that remain to be examined, as well as coverage of Native American issues in broadcast news. The entire area of public broadcasting and the Native American should be researched, both in terms of programming and station ownership and operation. The inter-relationships of Indians, popular music, radio, and television should also be started to help complete a fuller inter-media picture.

In commercial television, the probably airing of *Hanta Yo* may provide social scientists with an opportunity to examine the impact of the program on the attitudes and beliefs held regarding Native Americans. While the classic western genre seems to have ended its run on network television, there are some indications that the modern-west soap opera, like *Dallas*, may replace the horse-opera. How does the Native American fit into this new program type? Finally, we know exceptionally little about the Native American and cable and pay-television. Further research in any of the above areas will serve to develop fully our understanding of the roles and images of Native Americans in broadcasting.

NOTES

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2. John A. Price, "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures," *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 153-71.
3. John Dunning, *Tune in Yesterday* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1976), pp. 367-71.
4. Dunning, pp. 506-507.
5. Dunning, pp. 578-80.
6. Dunning, pp. 259-61.
7. Raymond W. Stedman, *The Serials: Drama and Suspense by Installment* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 169.

8. *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*. A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. (Washington, D.C., August 1977), pp. 6-7.

9. Ralph E. Friar and Natasha A. Friar *The Only Good Indian. . . The Hollywood Gospel* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), pp. 274-76.

10. Bea Medicine, "Hanta Yo: A New Phenomenon," *The Indian Historian* 12 (1979): 2-5.

11. Letter from Bruce Baird, Chairman of the Board and Frank Blythe, Executive Director, Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, to JoAllyn Archambault, April 4, 1980 (Copy in author's possession).

12. Ward Churchill, Norbert Hill, and MaryAnn Hill, "Media Stereotyping and Native Response: An Historical Overview," *The Indian Historian* 11 (1978): 45-56, 63.

13. Laurell E. Schuerman, Frank M. Blythe, and Thomas J. Sork *Native American Media Needs: An Assessment* (Lincoln, NE: Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, 1979).