

KYUK in Bethel: Pioneering Native Broadcasting in Alaska

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KYUK TV/AM in Bethel, Alaska, is undoubtedly one of the most unusual broadcast enterprises in the United States public broadcasting system today. KYUK was the first station owned and operated by Native Americans in the United States. It still provides the only local broadcast service to one of the most remote areas of the far North.

KYUK Radio first went on the air in 1971, followed in 1973 by KYUK TV. A weekly newspaper called *The Tundra Drums* was later added to this pioneering media conglomerate. Together, these enterprises offered the only mass media available to a population of 20,000 Yup'ik Eskimos living within a 56,000 square mile isolated area in southwestern Alaska that is the size of the state of Ohio.

Since the mid 1970s, other isolated Native stations have been constructed in Alaska and other parts of the United States, but KYUK was the first, and became a model for the structure and operation of many of the stations that followed.

This article examines the history, programming philosophy, and funding sources of KYUK. It also contrasts KYUK's unique operation with those of more conventional public broadcasting stations elsewhere in the United States.

Challenged by the Environment

... a shabby, dreary town, in flat, dull river delta country... a part of Alaska that might as well be Kansas, except for the summer mosquitoes and winter cold...¹

To appreciate the difficulty of constructing and operating broadcast stations in the Alaskan Bush, it is necessary to understand the vastness, isolation, and climatic challenges presented by the environment. Bethel is located on the treeless tundra halfway between Anchorage, Alaska, and Siberia. There are no roads to Bethel. Or trains. Or year-round marine access. Air transport is the only way in

and out for much of the year. At times, even aircraft cannot make the trip. In the winter of 1989, for example, the temperature dropped to -54°C and the barometric pressure plunged so low that instruments on jets ceased to function, causing all planes to be grounded. Less than a month later, the eruption of a volcano between Bethel and Anchorage put so much ash into the atmosphere that all aircraft were again grounded. Such events, though uncommon, cut Bethel off from the outside world.

Travel by four-wheel drive truck is the favorite means of local transportation in Bethel, but it is limited to a 27 kilometer loop of mostly unpaved road, except in the winter when the nearby Kuskokwim River freezes solid and is maintained as a state highway. Travel by boat in summer, and dog team or snow machine in winter, are other common forms of local transportation in the Delta region.

By Alaskan standards, Bethel receives very little snow. What little there is, however, is shaped into huge drifts by a constant gale blowing off the ice-packed Bering Sea. Houses are constructed on elevated sand pads and wood pilings to escape the buckling and heaving permafrost that lies just below the tundra's surface. During blizzards, the air is filled with blowing sand from the pads.

Late in May the Kuskokwim River begins to thaw and break up, and ice jams cause annual flooding of Bethel and neighboring villages. The town flounders in mud while the riverbank erodes, dumping real estate into the roaring muddy river current.²

Local Politics Nurture and Distract

"I come here today to straighten you guys out!" Eddie Hoffman, original Bethel Broadcasting, Inc., board member and Honorary Chief of 52 Yup'ik Eskimo villages, addressing KYUK staff.

KYUK was an experiment. It was to be the first in a series of radio and television stations in rural Alaska under the direction of the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission.³ Under a Commission plan, the stations would be licensed to a community board of directors, then built and operated largely with state funding in rural areas where no other local broadcast service was available. The Delta of southwestern Alaska was an ideal location for a pilot project because of its remoteness, large Native population, and lack of radio and television service.

The small city of Bethel became the site of the first Bush Alaskan station. Located some 644 kilometers west of Anchorage, with a

population of 2,500, Bethel was the hub for 52 small Yup'ik Eskimo villages spread over thousands of square kilometers with a combined population of 20,000. Although radio signals from Anchorage, Nome and the Soviet Union could occasionally be heard in the evening, interference and fading problems were severe. A 10-watt Air Force radio network repeater station at a nearby radar facility reached only a small portion of Bethel and none of the nearby villages.

Its small bilingual population and non-cash economy caused Bethel to be classified by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as having no potential as a future commercial radio site.⁴ Bethel's predicament seemed clear: The region had no local electronic media and could not reliably receive transmissions from elsewhere. Prospects for commercial media development in the future were judged to be nearly nonexistent. In short, if the state government didn't nurture the development of radio in an area, it might never happen. Native leaders and politicians from the Bethel area began to work actively for the establishment of a radio station in their district. Bethel was promoted as the ideal site for the first Bush station.⁵

In March, 1970, the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission began work on a construction permit application. Bethel Broadcasting was incorporated to hold the license for the new station, although no board of directors was named. Despite the lack of a functioning board, the FCC accepted the application and quickly granted a construction permit so that KYUK could qualify for state funding before the fiscal year ended on June 30. The call letters were chosen because "YUK" means person in the Yup'ik Eskimo language. The original permit was for a 10,000-watt daytime operation at 700 KHz. This was later modified to 5,000 watts operating at 570 KHz, which reduced power consumption costs and allowed the station to operate on a frequency that permitted full-time (instead of daytime only) operation.⁶

Even before KYUK signed on the air it experienced problems that would be commonplace in the years to come. Finding a qualified professional who could serve as both manager and chief engineer for the station took longer than expected and delayed construction until the fall. By then, the frozen ground made it impossible to construct a permanent studio building or tower until the following summer. The FCC granted KYUK a Special Temporary Authority that allowed it to go on the air during the daytime only, from a temporary studio using a long wire strung between two buildings as a makeshift transmission antenna. Creative engineering and cooperation of the FCC enabled KYUK to sign on the air on 13 May 1971, earning it the dis-

tion of being the first Native owned and operated radio station in the United States. It is still, in fact, the only Native television station.

Care went into choosing representatives who were to serve on the first Bethel Broadcasting Board of Directors. The original Board was to be composed of members of the various Native groups in the area, in addition to representatives from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the city of Bethel and the University of Alaska. From the beginning, severe administrative problems were caused by members who challenged the authority of the station manager to direct the day-to-day operation of KYUK. Members of the original Board remember that meetings frequently ended in shouting matches and overturned furniture.⁷

The Board of Directors refused to grant the manager authority to hire personnel or purchase equipment because they felt that it was their responsibility. When it became apparent that the construction costs of the KYUK radio tower had been grossly underestimated, the manager tried to raise additional funds from local sources. He was told that his initiative had again exceeded what the Board considered to be his authority. Three months after KYUK went on the air, the Board fired the first manager/engineer and replaced him with a local Native who had no previous training or experience in radio. The second manager lasted less than a month.

It became apparent that KYUK's survival would depend on finding a strong manager who could oversee daily operations, work cooperatively with the Board, and find a way to bring the soaring construction costs under control. That person was Jim Croll.

Croll had been working for the Navajo Nation in Gallup, New Mexico, producing radio and television news features when he was offered the job of KYUK manager. He arrived in December 1973 to find a station that signed on and off following no particular set schedule. Staff announcers had received no training and had little idea of how a radio station should sound. During the two years that Croll managed KYUK he instituted a staff and volunteer training program, began a daily news operation, and expanded the small station newspaper, called *The Tundra Drums*, into the only major weekly paper in southwest Alaska.⁸

Passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 had an immediate impact on the operation of KYUK. ANCSA changed the power base of Native Americans in Alaska. Under the new law, Alaska Native corporations were established and 44 million acres and payments of nearly one billion dollars were divided among the newly

formed corporations.⁹ Natives were thrust into the modern world of business and high finance and with that came an immediate need for modern communication, bilingual education and a platform for discussing current local issues. The importance of KYUK to the Native community grew proportionately.

Bethel was the headquarters for the new Calista Native Corporation, which was owned by the nearly 20,000 Yup'ik Eskimos in KYUK's service area. To stave off an attempt by the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) to take over the station's license, KYUK gave the AVCP a greater voice on the station's Board of Directors. The bylaws of Bethel Broadcasting were rewritten so that representation on the Board would be based more on geographic considerations than organizational membership, as had previously been the case. Under the new bylaws, no more than four members of the nine-member board could come from the city of Bethel. Five members would be appointed from Eskimo villages along the lower Yukon River, coastal region, upper and lower Kuskokwim River and Kuskokwim Bay.¹⁰ The new plan assured that a majority of the Board would be Natives from the Calista region. KYUK also renewed its commitment to employ more Natives and expand bilingual programming.

The next year, 1972, marked the beginning of a period of fantastic growth for KYUK. The radio tower was finally constructed, and a new studio facility was built with room for expansion into television. Using a grant of \$620,000 obtained by an Alaska state senator and the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission, KYUK TV, Channel 4, went on the air September 14, 1972.¹¹ Like its sister radio station, KYUK TV had the distinction of becoming the first Native owned and operated television station in the United States.

Bethel Broadcasting, Inc., expanded into print in 1974 when KYUK began publishing the only newspaper in the region, a weekly called *The Tundra Drums*. What had started as a modest program guide for the station developed into a source of revenue with the sale of print advertising and subscriptions.¹²

By 1974, the Board of Directors had also matured. It settled into a positive advisory role that left the business of daily station operations to the general manager and professional staff. Instead of meeting each week, scheduled board meetings were held quarterly.

In the mid 1980s, a downward turn in the oil market battered Alaska's economy. State financial support for public broadcasting dropped by more than twenty percent. Despite a reduced budget, KYUK expanded services to its rural Native audience. In 1987, KYUK

radio increased power from 5 to 10 Kw and changed frequencies to 640 KHz, a clear channel AM frequency with few of the signal interference problems usually experienced by AM radio stations. The change increased transmission power consumption costs, but the improvement in signal range and quality were considered worthwhile tradeoffs.

The television production facility was also busy during this period. It produced a series of award-winning documentaries about Yup'ik Eskimos and life in the Bush. Many of the documentaries were distributed via satellite to television audiences throughout Alaska and outside the state.

PTV Programming With a Twist

The vast majority of KYUK broadcasting was educational, but the Delta public thirsted for greater variety. Pretty soon a new form of bootlegging sprang up that had nothing to do with alcoholic spirits.¹³

Although KYUK set the early standard for locally-produced bilingual Native radio and television programming in the Alaskan Bush, its local audience began to demand new and different sources of entertainment and information programming. Videotapes of national programming from the Public Broadcasting Service were shipped to Bethel for delay broadcast, often weeks later than the programs were seen elsewhere in the country. National Public Radio network feeds were delivered over a poor quality telephone line. Both systems for delivering programs to Bethel continued until 1978, when satellite feeds made live programming possible for both radio and television.¹⁴

Many television viewers were disappointed that popular commercial television programming wasn't available on KYUK. A local group of business people, called the Bethel Film Club, raised money to purchase video tapes of commercial shows from Seattle and the Los Angeles area. By as early as 1974, KYUK had begun to air a nightly mix of commercial and non-commercial programming.

The change in KYUK television programming didn't go unnoticed. Acting on a complaint from an Anchorage television station manager, the Complaint and Compliance Division of the Federal Communications Commission wrote KYUK TV in 1975 and ordered it to stop broadcasting commercial programs. The Commission was more upset by the fact that the programs were being aired with the commercials intact (a practice not allowed on stations holding non-commercial licenses) than they were about the content of the programs. Despite

the warning, KYUK continued to broadcast commercial programs (complete with advertisements) until the Alaska Educational Broadcasting Commission, following a visit from the FBI, ordered it to stop in 1977. A month later the FCC, citing the remoteness of the station and the special circumstances under which it operated, waived the rules. The station would be allowed to continue broadcasting commercial programs, complete with uncut network commercials, if KYUK could obtain the permission of the commercial networks to re-broadcast their shows. By 1978, KYUK had signed agreements with ABC-TV, NBC-TV and CBS-TV. KYUK remains the only non-commercial station in the United States with a commercial programming waiver from the Federal Communications Commission.¹⁵

Home Grown Programming

There was only one channel. . . from Bethel. It broadcast a mixture of commercial and educational programs. The children watched "Sesame Street" each afternoon. Little Eskimo kids coming off the tundra and sitting three feet from the screen; learning to count from one to ten in Spanish. Gone was the symbolism of the Raven and the Bear. The new Gods were Big Bird and Bert and Ernie.¹⁶

Programming on KYUK has always been unconventional, by the standards of American public radio and television stations. The explanation resides in the fact that most public stations serve as alternative information and entertainment services—alternative to the commercial media that are readily available in most communities. KYUK, however, is the sole broadcast service for most of its audience. Its service must literally be all things to all people. Providing all needed and wanted services of a community precludes the sort of specialization that is common among public radio stations in the United States. It is increasingly common for stations to provide all classical music, or jazz, or news services, for example. Circumstances and mission have compelled KYUK to deliver a highly eclectic schedule. Around 70 percent of KYUK radio programming originates locally. Since 85 percent of KYUK's audience is Yup'ik Eskimo, and there are no other sources of Yup'ik Eskimo programming, KYUK must rely heavily on its own bilingual staff to produce this programming. To meet this need, half of the personnel at KYUK are Yup'ik.

The traditional notion of broadcasting to mass audiences also gives way, in Bethel, to point to point transmissions that serve as a kind of

substitute for telephones and two way radios, which are uncommon in the most isolated localities. KYUK Radio transmits personal messages from one person to another on a program called "Tundra Drums."¹⁷ Four times each day, "Tundra Drums" helps villagers locate lost children, stolen boats and snow machines, make funeral arrangements, learn flight schedules, announce Bethel jury selection and just offer friendly greetings to those who live beyond the reach of telephone or newspaper. For other listeners, it is pure entertainment.

KYUK has never lost sight of the fact that radio, though lacking the glamour of television, serves a special role in the region. Radio is less expensive to operate, its signal reaches farther, and programs can be originated from remote locations inaccessible to television equipment. Daily entertainment on KYUK Radio features bilingual hosts spinning records and playing recorded programs targeted to the Native population in the villages. Country and western music, rock and roll, and home-recorded Yup'ik gospel music are especially popular. Weather forecasts, live coverage of the Bethel City Council meetings,¹⁸ fur and fish prices, play-by-play sports and political debates are also popular components of KYUK's local radio service.

The most popular radio format, however, is the call-in talk show. Weekly series, in English and Yup'ik, such as "Yuk To Yuk," feature guests discussing local issues of importance. "Ask The Doctor" allows villagers with no local medical services to call in their health questions. "Talk Line" is an open topic show that invites everything from gossip to heated controversy (advertised as "the show you hate. . . and hate to miss!").¹⁹

Local television programming on KYUK is reminiscent of local television everywhere in the 1950s. Almost everyone on the staff appears before the camera from time to time. Probably the most innovative program to originate at KYUK-TV was "Ask An Alaskan." Billed as a "home grown quiz show," the series featured local guests answering Alaska trivia questions. Prizes ranged from gift certificates donated by local merchants to cases of fresh fruit. Because of its popularity, "Ask An Alaskan" became the first KYUK television series to be shown statewide on the Rural Alaska Television Network and the idea for the show was re-worked by many public broadcasting stations in other states. After four years on the air, KYUK decided to let the series rest in 1989 because most potential contestants in the small town had been seen many times on the program. A bilingual Yup'ik version of the game show continued on KYUK radio for a short time, but was eventually cancelled as well, for the

same reason.

KYUK-TV often wrestles with the problem of how to make nationally-syndicated programs more relevant to its Bush audience. In 1987, a package of old horror and science fiction movies was acquired from a Los Angeles film distributor. Instead of showing the movies without an introduction, or adopting the cliché of a “creature feature” approach with a vampire or witch as host, KYUK capitalized on the unique audience and lifestyle of the Bush. “Tundra Terror Theater” was born. Each movie was hosted by “Horrible Clyde” in typical “bush rat” attire of flannel shirt and jeans. Beginning, middle and end segments were often shot on location around Bethel. A cast of monsters behaved in very unorthodox ways on the show: the Creature From the Black Lagoon went ice fishing on the frozen Kuskokwim, the Wolfman pulled a dog sled, and the Frankenstein Monster stumbled through fish camps pursued by laughing Eskimo children. The exaggerated action and minimal dialogue in the films made them popular with non-English speaking viewers. A contest segment was eventually added to the show and, when “Tundra Terror Theater” began a three-year run on statewide television, a toll-free number was given, so that viewers throughout rural Alaska could participate.

Local programming has never been cheap to produce at KYUK. Over one-quarter²⁰ of KYUK’s radio/television budget goes into the production of news. It airs more than ten hours of regularly-scheduled bilingual news each week.²¹ In addition, there are the broadcasts of most news feeds from National Public Radio and the Alaska Public Radio Network, including National Native News.

Problems associated with news production at KYUK reflect the constraints of the environment and local culture. Covering, for television, a story in a Native village 30 kilometers away might entail either chartering an airplane or hitching a flight with the Fish and Game Department into the roadless country. Remote camera gear seldom works properly in the summer because of the blowing sand. In the winter, with temperatures sometimes dropping to -40°C, tape becomes brittle, batteries lose their charge, and everything mechanical becomes unreliable.

There are social problems as well. Yup’ik Eskimo news reporters often find themselves in the position of having to ask Elders tough questions that are considered impolite and disrespectful in traditional Yup’ik culture. Young people are expected to listen to and learn from their Elders, and not to question them. A reporter can be placed in the position of being a good reporter, but a “bad Eskimo.” One

Yup'ik reporter at KYUK, Adolph Lewis, quit his job in 1990 because of the stress this situation engendered for him:

My elders say, 'Look at the person's mouth when speaking: otherwise, you won't retain the message.' But I've learned to establish eye contact when speaking to others. I pay attention when speaking to Yup'iks. I stare at them too hard and make them self-conscious. My mind is in two modes: Western and Yup'ik.²²

The traditional Yup'ik Eskimo will talk for hours about the good in his village, but will evade any mention of topics which might reflect badly upon his neighbors, regardless of how newsworthy the subject. Rhonda McBride, KYUK news director, explains the conflict:

A village is a special kind of community, almost a living, breathing entity. If you live in these parts long enough, you can almost tell where a person lives just by looking at them. After a while, you know all names. The Gumps. They live up in Hooper Bay. The Zaukars. That's an upriver name. The Morgans. They're out of Aniak. A village is like a huge extended family. Generally everyone is related. So when you write a negative story about a village, especially a suicide, it's like you're attacking the whole village.²³

In spite of these constraints, KYUK continues to make news a local programming priority, and it remains the only source of timely local news in the Delta region.

In 1987, a sophisticated remote production van was purchased by KYUK with funds from the State of Alaska. Owning such a van in a town with only 27 kilometers of road seemed almost comical to many, but its operating radius expands to over 160 kilometers during the winter when the Kuskokwim River freezes, making it possible to drive to upriver villages. Besides its usefulness to the news department, the van makes local shoots and remote radio broadcasts of community activities commonplace. Broadcasts of parades, championship softball games, town hall meetings and watching the river ice break up in the spring complement regular programming. In January, the Kuskokwim 300 Sled Dog Race from Bethel to the upriver village of Aniak is covered live on radio and television and is beamed by satellite to the rest of the state. The van made it possible to provide such coverage, even in typically snowy weather with wind chills down to -73°C.

In the early 1980s, KYUK turned its attention to the creation of marketable documentaries. To that end it created KYUK Video Productions, a separately incorporated, in-house television production

unit. Between 1985 and 1988, KYUK produced four major documentaries each year for national distribution, requiring KYUK production crews to travel across Alaska, into Russia, and even to Europe. Many of the programs have been shown outside Alaska on the Pacific Mountain Network and the Discovery Channel in the United States, and in Japan. Revenues from locally-produced programs have been used to finance other documentary projects.

Most of the programs dealt with the history, lifestyle and environment of southwestern Alaska. Other programs explored such diverse subjects as a Yup'ik version of the Greek tragedy *Antigone*, child abuse in rural Alaska, the art of mask-making, and a centennial history of the settling of the Kuskokwim River Delta from the viewpoint of Native people. The latter production included rare footage from seventy-five year old films discovered in caches long forgotten.²⁴ Some of the source films were found in the attic of a Native children's orphanage. Other material came from the personal effects of missionaries in the lower 48 who had long ago left Alaska. Four silent comedies were found in an abandoned trapper's cabin. Hundreds of audio interviews with elders were collected, transcribed and stored as oral history.

KYUK publishes a catalog and advertises in national publications to market its teleproductions. Catalogs are sent to museums, teachers, libraries and anthropological journals. Videos that might be of general interest to tourists visiting Alaska are advertised in popular regional magazines. While video sales have been good, profits have fallen short of what was needed to finance future productions. To increase income, KYUK Video Productions began bidding on contract projects requiring studio and field television video that could only be shot in the Bush. Public broadcasting stations in the United States are generally discouraged from competing for commercial contracts, because independent producers in many markets consider it unfair competition from government subsidized entities. In KYUK's case, however, the isolation and high cost of bringing a film unit to the Bethel area is so great that few outsiders have shown interest in bidding on the low profit projects. Contracted productions have included employee recruitment videos made for Bush school districts and Public Health Service Hospitals, news segments for other television stations, mini-documentaries on combating AIDS in the Bush, and programs produced for government agencies such as Alaska Fish and Game, the US Corp of Engineers, and the National Weather Service.

As unlikely as it once seemed, today KYUK has radio and tele-

vision competition. First, a small commercial religious FM station went on the air in Bethel in 1985 (its low-power FM transmitter does not reach many of the villages). Then, the State of Alaska installed satellite downlinks and low-power transmitters in many of the villages and began broadcasting the Rural Alaska Television Network, consisting of an amalgam of popular commercial television programming from Anchorage, to much of the region.

KYUK welcomed the new media. The continuous musical entertainment on the new radio station allowed KYUK to devote more time to bilingual programming. KYUK's response to the presence of the state television network was to cut back on its commercial programming in order to avoid duplicating commercial programs now being imported from Anchorage.

Ironically, it was the advent of small cable television systems in outlying villages that caused KYUK to significantly increase its local and statewide news coverage. Village cable systems only had access to satellite-delivered commercial network-affiliated stations from far away Detroit. The barrage of irrelevant Detroit news stimulated vocal demand for more local news from KYUK.²⁵ The competition helped KYUK to define its niche in the region.

Just Keeping the Lights On and the Fire Going

In Alaska, the airplane does not just cover distance. It is also a time machine. You get on in Anchorage, an aggressive, if tacky, late-twentieth-century American city, and get off, eighty minutes later, not just five hundred miles away, but also fifty years back in time. No plumbing, only occasional electricity, and with the few streets of the town not yet paved.²⁶

Most non-commercial stations lament the unstable nature of their funding. KYUK has been no exception. With over 60 percent of its operating budget coming from the State of Alaska, the station finds itself at the mercy each year of the Governor, the Legislature and the price of North Slope crude oil on the world market. As the fortunes of Alaska's economy rise and fall, so too does support for public broadcasting in the Bush.

Unfortunately, the same factors that make KYUK a unique public broadcasting enterprise also make it a challenge to support financially. Its remote location, far from urban centers, raises the price of most goods and services by 50 percent or more over comparable costs outside the state. Public utilities in Bethel, and across much of the North, are not only highly priced, but also undependable. Black outs,

brown outs and power surges damage crucial telecommunications equipment. Extreme temperatures and blowing sand make KYUK an engineer's nightmare. Transmission and production equipment wear out in a short time and have to be replaced or repaired. Shipping by river barge and air often double the cost of equipment and parts and make overnight emergency delivery service impossible.

Personnel costs are high. Staff must be paid enough to cover the high cost of living in the Bush: \$5.00 for a gallon of milk and \$8.00 for a pretty good hamburger are typical. The turnover rate of staff recruited from outside Alaska is high because many newcomers simply cannot deal with the isolation, darkness and cold for more than a single winter. The large amount of local bilingual programming increases the number of people who are needed for productions, and inflates staff costs.

Transportation costs are also high. A flight from Bethel to the state capital in Juneau is approximately the same distance as flying from Oklahoma City to Los Angeles, and can cost twice as much. As a result, travel must be kept to a minimum, which adds to the sense of isolation.

The traditional fund-raising techniques that are employed by most public broadcasters in the United States have not proven to be successful in Bethel. With only 20,000 people in its service area, most of whom have little cash income, traditional on-air pledge drives yield disappointing results. KYUK adopted its own version of the pledge drive, tailored to the culture and traditions of the community. For three nights the station broadcasts only live local programming with a minimum of pledge breaks. Simulcasting radio with television, the doors to KYUK are opened to the public for a combination open house, potluck supper, dance, auction and fundraiser. An invitation is extended to everyone in town and the villages to come and help celebrate and support their community station. The television studio is filled with Yup'ik Eskimo dancers and gospel singers, rock and roll bands from the villages, local folk singers, country and western groups, video produced by local high school students and an auction that features Native arts and crafts, salmon, berries, home cooked dinners and sled dog puppies. Donations and pledges from the first locally-produced KYUK on-air fund drive in 1980 came to just over \$20,000. By 1990, a "Kids Night" had been added and pledges for the three evenings totaled over \$36,000. The event has become a celebration of fun and giving, much in keeping with the Yup'ik Eskimo potlatch tradition.²⁷

To raise money throughout the year, KYUK obtained a Gaming

and Raffle Permit from the state in 1983. In an area devoid of most forms of organized entertainment, bingo is a popular pastime. Hosted nightly at the VFW Hall, local non-profit organizations run the games and sell pulltabs, which are rather like paper slot machines. Although initially opposed by some members of the KYUK staff and Board of Directors because of moral objections to gambling, bingo nets KYUK a profit of over \$80,000 per year and has become an important new revenue source. The station runs the local bingo operation every Friday night, and on alternate Thursdays.

A more recent entrepreneurial venture for the station has been sponsorship of Spring Breakup and Fourth of July Raffles, which raise an additional \$20,000. Prizes have included 4-wheel drive pickup trucks, fishing and pleasure boats, and "Thaw-out" trips to California.

Conclusion

For over twenty years, KYUK has been the primary communication service for Bethel and fifty-two Eskimo villages located nearly 650 kilometers from the nearest movie theater, commercial television

KYUK's distinguished accomplishments include:

- 1) KYUK was the first public broadcasting station in the Alaskan Bush.
- 2) KYUK was the first successful Native owned and operated radio station in the United States.
- 3) KYUK was the first, and is still the only Native owned and operated television station in the United States.
- 4) KYUK is the only full service station to program and broadcast in the Yup'ik Eskimo language on a daily basis.
- 5) KYUK is the only non-commercial television station with a waiver from the Federal Communications Commission allowing it to run commercial programming in its daily schedule.
- 6) KYUK is an important depository of audio and video Yup'ik Eskimo history.
- 7) Despite its isolation, KYUK averages over \$10.00 in per capita donations from its service area. This is one of the highest per capita contribution levels for any public station in the United States.

station or sports arena. For much of that time, the station has been a well-kept secret. Only in the last few years has KYUK expanded its mission to include preserving and presenting the culture of the Yup'ik Eskimo and rural Bush lifestyle to the rest of the world.

As one of only about two dozen Native broadcasting stations in the United States, KYUK's mission has always been to both serve and preserve Native culture and a way of life as it exists on the raw northern frontier of Alaska. A 1988 survey of Native broadcasting in Alaska recognized KYUK Radio and Television for carrying more bilingual programming and employing more Native professionals than any other station in the country. At a meeting of the Alaska Anthropology Society, the statement was made that the Yup'ik language was alive and well today, in part, because KYUK made it a daily, accepted part of Native life in the Delta.²⁸

For the last twenty years there has been a slow but steady growth of Native owned and operated broadcast stations throughout the US. That growth owes much to the pioneer experience of KYUK.²⁹

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Endnotes

1. Joe McGinniss, *Going to Extremes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 104.
2. Booklet published by the city of Bethel and sent to the legislature in an attempt to protect the city from river erosion. *Bethel on the Brink-1986* (City of Bethel, 1986), 1-16.
3. Subsequently named the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission.
4. Many communities in rural Alaska have subsistence instead of cash economies. In such communities most residents engage in hunting, fishing, and gathering activities, supplemented by a cash income from selling crafts, trapping, commercial fishing, fire fighting, serving in the National Guard and other occasional employment. Very little cash is exchanged.

5. KYUK was not the first public station in Alaska. The University of Alaska Fairbanks constructed the first public radio station, KUAC-FM, in 1962, followed by KUAC-TV, a decade later.
6. John Thomas Duncan wrote an excellent study of early Alaskan broadcasting in his unpublished dissertation "Alaska Broadcasting 1922-77: An Examination of Government Influence" (University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1982), 45-53.
7. Interview with J. B. Crow, original member of the Bethel Broadcasting Board of Directors, May, 1989.
8. Now living in Denver, Colorado, Jim Croll remembers his two years at KYUK as "the most rewarding experience of my career. It was also the hardest work I had ever undertaken."
9. David S. Case, *Alaska Natives and American Law* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1984), 14-16.
10. Article III, Section 13 of the Bethel Broadcasting, Inc., by-laws (Revised 2/2/85) lists all villages served by KYUK and states that a division of the service area into geographic areas should "better reflect the varied interests of the people living within the broadcast station service area. . . ."
11. Interview with George Hohman, former Alaska state senator who was instrumental in funding KYUK television, Bethel, Alaska, January, 1989.
12. *The Tundra Drums* is now a commercial newspaper and is not affiliated with KYUK.
13. Mary Lenz and James H. Barker, *Bethel: The First 100 Years* (City of Bethel Centennial History Project, 1985), 152.
14. KYUK terminated its membership in National Public Radio in 1991 because of state funding cuts but revived the service again in 1992 when NPR extended special rates to small, rural markets like Bethel.
15. The commercial programming waiver for KYUK was renewed by the FCC in 1989 despite the fact that the Rural Alaska Television Network had begun to offer a more orthodox source of commercial television programming to much of the viewing area.
16. McGinniss, *Going to Extremes*, 112.
17. Programs like "Tundra Drums" are common in Bush Alaska and northern Canada. Using radio and TV for personal communication is officially prohibited by regulation of the FCC in the United States, but the regulation has never been enforced in Alaska.

18. There was some talk of taking live coverage of the Bethel City Council off the air because it did not pertain directly to the majority of KYUK listeners who lived in villages. Several village elders remarked that they enjoyed listening to the Bethel Council meetings because it taught their village councils what not to do. The program is still being aired.
19. Telephone interview with Robert Somers, former KYUK public affairs director, who hosted "Talk Line" for three years, Galena, Alaska, January, 1991.
20. Approximately \$350,000.
21. For many years KYUK-TV broadcast a unique bilingual half-hour nightly newscast in Yup'ik and English. The program was cancelled in 1992 because of budget cuts, although the station still airs brief bilingual television news updates each evening and an in-depth weekly bilingual public affairs program.
22. Geoff Kennedy, "KYUK loses Yup'ik news director," *Tundra Times*, September 17, 1990.
23. Rhonda McBride, KYUK news director, in an edited-for-length memo that appeared in the *Polar Bear*, the monthly newsletter of the Alaska Press Club, October, 1990.
24. The cold and relatively dry climate of southwestern Alaska preserves film stock almost indefinitely.
25. Alaska State Troopers often speak of the detrimental effect that Detroit local news has had on isolated villages in the Bush. The image Natives see of the lower 48 United States is one of crack houses, wholesale murder, and unchecked violence.
26. McGinniss, *Going to Extremes*, 107.
27. Letter from Lenida Hawkins, KYUK business manager, Bethel, Alaska, January, 1991.
28. Introductory remarks from a session featuring KYUK documentary films, Fairbanks, Alaska, March, 1988.
29. In March, 1991, KYUK was awarded the Wassaja Award from the Native American Journalists Association for outstanding bilingual news production.