

Olbermann's Support for South Dakota Tribe Points Way to More Inclusive Indian Country Coverage

Thursday 11 November 2010

[by: Rose Aguilar, t r u t h o u t | News Analysis](#)

All it took was a [one-minute commentary](#). On February 9, 2010, Keith Olbermann told his viewers about a humanitarian crisis affecting 50,000 people. It was so bad, [college basketball fans were being asked to share their soles](#). "Haiti?" he asked. "South Dakota. The shoe donations are being sought at the University of South Dakota and they are for the residents of the [Cheyenne River Sioux](#) Reservation."

On January 21, 2010, a devastating blizzard and snowstorm hit the area, one of the poorest in the country, knocking down over 3,000 utility poles. Residents were without electricity, water or heat in subzero temperatures for weeks. The tribe declared a state of emergency. "The government has done next to nothing for the Native Americans, who on a nice, sunny spring day there still face unemployment of 85 percent," Olbermann said sternly. "Doing nothing for these people, an American tradition since at least 1776."

He then directed viewers who wanted to donate to the Countdown website, where they would find a link to the [Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe storm relief fund](#).

There were no videos or photos of the devastation. There was no interview with a tribal member. It was a one-minute commentary. According to Tribal Chairman Joe Brings Plenty, Olbermann's call for donations, coupled with community efforts and matching money from the Bush and Northwest Area Foundations, brought in \$975,000. Daily Kos blogger Bill in Maryland [posted a diary](#) with donation links for neighboring tribes.

Chairman Brings Plenty said the response was overwhelming. "It was crazy. It had a huge effect compared to what we were doing to get coverage and people in DC to take notice. The government had to take notice because of the phone calls that were coming in."

Leo Fischer, general manger of the Tri-County/Mni Waste Water System, said that after the commentary aired, his phone wouldn't stop ringing. People who saw it drove 13 hours to drop off clothes, food and bottled water. "Very few people had generators, so they had to find a spot for the bottled water so it wouldn't freeze," he said. It was that cold.

A few days after the commentary ran, Fischer went to Washington DC to meet with politicians about the tribe's ongoing water crisis and the desperate need to upgrade their water system. "The first thing they said was, 'We don't want national news on what we're discussing.' Some of the folks in DC were upset about the video. They felt they got hit pretty hard, but it sure opened a lot of eyes," he said.

"It put some of those people on notice out in DC," said Chairman Brings Plenty. "We have a treaty right to the water. It's our birthright and we can't even utilize it."

Between 30 and 50 homes on the reservation in the town of Eagle Butte still don't have running water, according to Fischer. "We have several families living under one roof here," he said. "In some cases, there are five families living in a three-bedroom house. Another problem is housing. We could build the houses, but we don't have the water to serve them. There's a waiting list of over 900 homes that could be built."

The first installment of the \$450 million water project will cost about \$65 million. Fischer said USDA officials offered the tribe a 25 percent loan for the first installment, but dire economic realities facing the reservation will make it difficult to pay back.

The water crisis facing the tribe goes back to 1944, when Congress authorized the Pick-Sloan Plan, a \$490 million proposal to build the Missouri River dams. A total of 107 projects were approved in response to devastating floods in Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska.

In the book ["Dammed Indians Revisited: The Continuing History of the Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux,"](#) historian Michael Lawson writes that the project "caused more damage to tribal lands and resources than any other public works project in history."

The project flooded more than 200,000 acres of bottomlands that helped to sustain the Sioux and forced the relocation of entire communities, according to Lawson.

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The Sioux people, he writes, "were forced, in violation of their treaty rights and without prior consultation, to relinquish their best land and resources, to evacuate their homes and ranches in the wooded bottomlands along the Missouri River, and to take up new homes on the marginal prairie lands that remained within their reservations. Hence, the disruption of their way of life was more severe than is usually the case with people displaced by public works projects."

Brings Plenty says sharing stories about the tribe's past and present are equally important, but once March came and left, the phone stopped ringing. He hasn't received a phone call from a national reporter in months. "The media could do a lot to educate the people. They're not getting the truth in their textbooks. Most people think we have a free ride. People think the US government takes care of the Indian people. People should come to the reservation to see the truth."

Fisher says if you visited Eagle Butte (population 5,000), you would see a community struggling to recover not only from the storm, but also from 13 tornadoes that hit in June. You would also see what a town with an 85 percent unemployment rate looks like. "The recession hasn't affected us because we've lived in a recession all of our lives," said Fischer. "Almost all of our businesses have closed. Things are slowly dying on the reservation. We used to have four or five sit-down restaurants. Now we only have one."

The only grocery store in town offers the basics. A dollar store opened two years ago and is doing well, but if residents need a winter coat or a new pair of shoes, they have no choice but to drive 100 miles to Wal-Mart.

Native American journalists who critique the press and closely follow coverage of Native Americans say these issues rarely, if ever, get attention in the national media. "I rarely see it," said Cristina Azocar, director of the [Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism](#) at San Francisco State University, past president of the [Native American Journalists Association](#) (NAJA) and member of the Upper Mattaponi Tribe in King William, Virginia. "I can't even remember the last time I saw anything about Native Americans in the newspapers I read. Nothing comes to mind."

Azocar says part of the problem is that reporters often use studies that break things down by race in their articles, and Native Americans are always left out. "You see blacks, whites, Asians and Hispanics, but never Native Americans. It's almost a population, that for statistical purposes, doesn't exist," she said.

A 2002 Reading Red Report conducted by NAJA analyzed 1,133 articles appearing from 1999-2001 in nine of the largest circulation newspapers in the U.S., including the New York Times, USA Today, and The Washington Post. According to the report, "the best stories simply reflected good-quality and fair-minded reporting; writing and editing applied to Native America. They treated Native Americans as people rather than historical figures. They explained to readers the unique status of federally recognized tribal nations as sovereign governments within the United States. They acknowledged the depth and diversity of Native American communities." Most stories, however, failed to accurately represent Indian Country. Mascot team names, casino gaming and "on the rez" stories made up the majority of stories.

Jeff Harjo, executive director of NAJA and member of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, says if a story about Native Americans makes the front page in his state, it almost always focuses on casinos or tribal government problems. "All of the positive news is buried. That's been an issue in Oklahoma for a long time."

The [2007 Reading Red Report](#) took a different approach by examining newspapers in areas with high percentages of Native Americans. It found that almost 64 percent of the articles focusing on Indian Country failed to include quotes from Native Americans.

The report concluded that the results were not surprising. "The news media report from a white perspective and the journalism profession is negligent in seeking out, hiring, training and promoting people of color."

In 2007, the American Society of Newspaper Editors reported that just 324 Native Americans were working in newsrooms. In 2009, that number had shrunk to 293 (122 reporters). According to the Reading Red Report, although it does not require a Native American to cover Indian Country, it is more likely that Indians are better aware of the issues affecting more than 560 tribes in the U.S.

[Mark Trahant](#), author of "Pictures of Our Nobler Selves: A History of American Indian Contributions to Journalism," says there are far more Native Americans working for newspapers and radio stations than there were when he started his career 30 years ago. Television is the exception. When he wrote his book in 1995, "There was one person working at the network

level. Here we are 15 years later and there's still only one. What happens when we go from one to zero?"

Trahant says he can't think of a time when there has ever been a Native American interviewed on the Sunday morning political shows or PBS. A recently released [Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting study](#) called "Taking the Public Out of Public TV" found that the guest list for the NewsHour on PBS was 80 percent male and 82 percent white. Since 2006, appearances by women of color decreased by a third to only four percent of US sources.

In March, [Russia Today ran a report](#) about the growing number of teen suicides on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. Most of the teenagers in the report have lost several friends to suicide. "I think it is just because of the poverty and the sadness, despair, hopelessness of the reservation," said Samantha Janis in an interview with RT correspondent Kristine Frazao.

Russia Today reported that in 2009, nine young people between the ages of 15 and 24 committed suicide on the reservation; there were at least 150 attempts. What if a US network ran a special on poverty and suicides in Indian Country? Would anything change?

Tribal Chair Brings Plenty said MSNBC's Keith Olbermann's one-minute commentary gave him a glimpse of what's possible. "If the media shine a light on the problems in Indian country, things can change. There are enough good people out there who believe the US government should do the right thing, but it's going to take a lot of light."