

Our own Third World gives us a jolt

This is a particularly good one - & timely!

THE CONFERENCE at Western's Graduate School of Journalism last month was purring along in a comfortably remote channel. The subject was "News from the Third World" and the main targets were U.S. networks and news services.

A journalist-turned-bureaucrat from Zimbabwe fulminated against the "colonial" press. A professor from Texas proved conclusively that U.S. television networks (and, by implication, their clients among Canadian networks) ignore Latin and Central America, and other Third World regions, until civil unrest or natural disaster strikes.

The 42 senior Canadian journalists at the conference were, in the usual Canadian way, sympathetic, right-minded but (unfortunately, of course) unable to help. The problem was too big for the limited resources of Canadian media.

Then Dan David got up to speak, and the smugness disappeared. The Canadian journalists at the conference suddenly found themselves confronting their own Third World — the native community that is almost invisible in major Canadian media.

"I think we do a hell of a lousy job," David said.

Self-recognition

The shock of self-recognition was not only in what David said (native leaders have said it before) but in what David is. He had said "we" when he spoke to the journalists from the *Globe & Mail*, the *National*, the *Journal*, *W5*, and others at the conference. In fact, he may have been, at that moment, the first native journalist in Canadian history who had ever said that.

At the age of 33, David, a CBC television journalist now working in Regina, is something of a phenomenon. As far as I know, he is the first Canadian Indian journalist to work on-air for a national television system in this country.

In Regina, residents of that city's huge

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EYE ON THE MEDIA



BY PETER DESBARATS

native ghetto are now seeing one of their own on the nightly television news. An incredible achievement — tempered for David by the realization that it has taken so long to achieve even this, and that his own success has raised a whole series of new questions for himself and his people.

For those who have followed his career, David's impact on the University of Western Ontario conference was no surprise. A tall, good-looking Mohawk from Quebec's Oka Reserve, near Montreal, he already was a veteran of native media in 1981 when he enrolled in Western's Program in Journalism for Native People, from which he graduated in 1982 with the "Outstanding Student" award given by the London City Press Club.

Subsequently, he was the only Canadian Indian accepted by a short-lived training program for "visible minorities" given by the CBC in Toronto. He worked as a radio reporter for the CBC's Northern Service, based in Whitehorse, before he took the job in Regina.

As a CBC reporter, David is, for the majority television audience in this country, the first visible achievement of a long and arduous development of native journalism.

According to an article by Enn Raudsepp, Associate Professor of Journalism at Concordia University, in the current issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, the native press in Canada has shown

great vitality but its situation, dependent on government grants and the favor of native political leaders, remains "precarious and somewhat artificial."

Raudsepp's 1983 survey covered 19 Indian and 11 Inuit publications, most of them weekly or monthly tabloids. Since 1974, these publications have been able to draw on a small pool of trained journalists graduating from special programs at Alberta's Grant MacEwan College (started in 1974), at Western (1980), and at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (1984). By 1983, the native press was employing 67 full-time and 22 part-time salaried employees.

Raudsepp discovered that three of the 11 native editors in his survey (other editors were still non-natives) had graduated from the special training programs in Alberta and London, Ont.

As I know from my own experience with the program at Western, most native journalism students want to work for their own media among their own people (students in our graduate school, of course, have exactly the same ambition). It is a rare native student who has the talent, self-confidence, ambition and desire to work in mainstream media.

For teachers who work in the special programs (which exist because native students almost never show up in the conventional journalism schools), someone like David is an unusual "bonus" in the rewarding task of preparing a new generation of journalists for native media.

For David himself, mainstream journalism has not been an easy career choice. As he told the conference, the question of news flows from our own "Third World" to the majority society is not, for him, an academic one.

"I'm very emotional about this," he said.

"The whole north end of Regina is native, and it's almost invisible. That's an oversimplification, perhaps, but it's the feeling I get when I see 30,000 Indians in a city and they're simply being ignored ... basically, because they're not part of the audience, and they're not being made to feel as if they are part of Regina, part of Saskatchewan, or part of Canada."

David had talked about this with news editors and directors in Regina and received all the conventional excuses: "... no time ... no money ... no staff ... native issues too complicated ... spokespeople hard to find ... the possibility of being called racists if we do stories about the horrible statistics ... the dilemma of reinforcing negative stereotypes," and so forth.

But David is now one of us and he knows that "we regularly send our cameras and a couple of reporters to sit around the mayor's office for two or three hours to get nothing, but we won't take our cameras over to the other side of the tracks."

He concluded that "we don't do the stories because they don't pay."

"You do a story about a 90% drop-out rate among native students in city school systems, and nothing happens," he said. "If these were white kids, you'd see cabinet ministers called down, school board officials asked to resign, principals and teachers fired."

But David also doesn't always do the stories.

Garbage beat

"I don't want to do the native beat," he said, "because I don't want to get put onto a beat that, in the newsroom, is considered the garbage beat. I think that I can do the same job as anyone else, on the labor beat, at City Hall, wherever."

"And if I'm doing the native stories," he added, "then all the other reporters have an out. Well, I'm not willing to let anyone off the hook."

It was clear, to those of us at the conference, that we were listening to something new. A "real journalist" among his own people who could say, "I don't have a hell of a lot of respect for Indian spokespeople ... they're politicians ... that's not where the real story is." And a native Canadian who is now one of us when he says: "There's a lot more out there than you realize — or if you do realize it, I don't understand why I'm not seeing the stories."

The conference produced no answers to this.

After David had presented us with Canada's Third World, we had glimpsed the problem, and it was us.

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