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# BREAKING THE NEOCOLONIAL NEWS CYCLE: COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY FROM A FIRST NATIONS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: For British Columbians to make informed, ecologically sustainable decisions that reflect the province's cultural diversity, aboriginal concerns need to be adequately communicated in the mainstream news media. Many rural First Nations face proposed resource development projects in their traditional territories that could negatively affect water quality and environmental integrity across the province. An ongoing struggle between members of the Tahltan First Nation, in northern BC, and the resource development industry provided a case study to examine the relationship between this remote First Nation and the mainstream news media. A collaborative ethnographic approach was used to study the relationship between the Tahltan First Nation and journalists covering the Sacred Headwaters issue. Data were collected through interviews with Tahltan spokespeople, non-native journalists, and both aboriginal and non-native communications specialists, and grounded theory method was used for data analysis. A perpetuating neocolonial news cycle emerged whereby the dominant news values of conflict, simplicity, and timeliness were mitigated through connection to place and relationships, but ultimately reinforced by remoteness and dwindling newsroom resources. This cycle could be broken through hybridity, which occurs when journalists invest time in visiting remote communities to build relationships and connection to places, or when First Nations build media capacity from within.
KEYWORDS: *First Nations; journalism; neocolonialism; intercultural communication*

**Breaking the Neocolonial News Cycle: Communicating Sustainability from a First Nations' Perspective**

As British Columbia struggles to settle its remaining land claims (Province of British Columbia, 2007; Muckle, 2007), resource-rich northern landscapes inhabited for thousands of years by First Nations (Duff, 1997; McMillan & Yellowhorn, 2004; Sewid-Smith, 1991) are increasingly the subject of debate over traditional use and environmental integrity. The mainstream news media by nature often report this debate and other First Nation's issues superficially (Harding, 2006; Rossiter, 2004), with coverage that largely revolves around conflict and provides little insight into aboriginal lifestyle, culture, and environmental concerns (Littlejohn, 2008). When greater cultural context is omitted from news reporting, residents in all parts of the province miss the opportunity to learn a diversity of perspectives regarding politics, economics, and environmental issues. Effectively communicating rural First Nations' perspectives to the province's primarily urban-based decision makers faces numerous challenges and, as a result, political decisions tends to reflect the economic interests of those living in the province's more populated southern regions.

Today in northern BC, a battle is being waged over an area widely known in the media as the Sacred Headwaters. The headwaters are located within the Tahltan First Nation's traditional territory, more than 1,000 kilometres directly north of Vancouver, or nearly 2,000 kilometres by road. Tahltan territory encompasses roughly 150,000 square kilometres (Paulsen, 2006) of northwestern BC, stretching to the Yukon in the north and Alaska in the west (Wonders, 2008) and including the communities of Iskut, Dease Lake, and Telegraph Creek, all of which have fewer than 500 residents, with each community spaced approximately an hour's drive apart. The Sacred Headwaters is accessed from a junction 10 kilometres south of Iskut, down 150 kilometres of rough dirt roads. The trip is slow, isolated, and unadvisable for solitary travellers.

Despite its geographic remoteness, the area is ecologically important as it marks the headwaters for the Stikine, Skeena, and Nass: three of BC's top salmon producing rivers. The Klappan, as it is known to the Tahltan, provides rich hunting and fishing grounds that have drawn Tahltan families into the headwaters each year for countless generations to access traditional hunting camps. In recent years, the Tahltan territory has been the

subject of more than a dozen resource extraction proposals from multinational corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell and Ontario-based Fortune Minerals Limited. Within the Tahltan Nation, tensions rose between those advocating for the potential employment resource extraction would generate and those concerned about environmental degradation and impacts on Tahltan culture and its subsistence lifestyle. In 2005, an eight-month elders' occupation of the Telegraph Creek band office ensued. This resulted in the formation of the Klabona Keepers Elders Society, a local group opposing development in the Klappan. The name Sacred Headwaters was given to the Klappan by a member of the Klabona Keepers and a non-native conservationist in an effort to garner media attention.

The Klabona Keepers were successful in raising media coverage, through awareness-raising campaigns in partnership with environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), and blockades of the Klappan River Road into the Sacred Headwaters. However, reports often reflected the dominant Western news perspective, giving only cursory attention to the deeper cultural context. These polarized cultures, the urban news media and a rural First Nation, offered a unique case study to examine how remote aboriginal issues in the North reach city-based decision makers in the South. This paper examines the interface between First Nations and the mainstream news media to identify barriers that deter meaningful communication of aboriginal issues to the general public and to suggest how these barriers can be addressed to facilitate more effective news coverage of aboriginal interests to a broader audience.

## Background

The Sacred Headwaters is generally hailed by the Klabona Keepers as a media success; it raised awareness for their cause, resulting in a two-year moratorium on coalbed methane development in the Klappan (Simpson, 2008; Stueck, 2008). However, First Nations' concerns were, at times, inadequately portrayed in the news media. While issues regarding First Nations' struggle for rights and title might seem remote to those living in BC's urban areas, the issue had potential environmental and economic impacts across the province. With this in mind, it seems paramount that BC residents are aware of the issue and have access to information from all perspectives. With their historic attachment to the land and traditional knowledge about ecological sustainability for the area, the Tahltan offer an important and unique perspective on resource development in

the Klappan. However, there was often a disconnect between Tahltan voices and urban understanding. As the headwaters for three of BC's largest rivers, groundwater contamination in the Klappan could have catastrophic effects on downstream regions, potentially affecting the entire province. Contamination could threaten wildlife numbers, tourism, and the long term viability of BC's economically and ecologically important salmon fishery. By speaking with Tahltan spokespeople, communications specialists, and journalists, this study attempts to shed light on how First Nations' perspectives can be better represented in the press.

Underscoring the importance of meaningful reporting on aboriginal issues in the mainstream news media, the United Nations' *Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of the Heritage of Indigenous People* (2000) notes that news outlets "should take effective measures to promote understanding of and respect for indigenous peoples' heritage," and that journalists should actively assist in exposing activities detrimental to indigenous culture (Daes, 2000; Littlejohn, 2008). While intercultural competence is often touted with regard to justice, health, and education systems (McNaughton & Rock, 2002), understanding First Nations' cultures from a media perspective has been largely overlooked, with most previous research limited to the portrayal of indigenous cultures in news reporting instead of the reciprocal relationship between the two (Harding, 2006; Littlejohn, 2008; Rossiter, 2004), thereby perpetuating the colonial act of subjectifying aboriginal culture rather than promoting inclusivity. The power differential imposed by colonization, external researchers, journalists, and other organizations has hampered relations and contributed to the Tahltan community's tepidity toward outsiders. Western values espoused by groups such as missionaries, researchers, ENGOs, and media outlets create a cultural neocolonialism that overshadows First Nations' interests and leads to superficial understanding of aboriginal issues by a dominant, non-native population.

## Literature Review

The Tahltan, and First Nations across Canada, have been deeply affected by the oppression and exploitation imposed by colonization. Outside influence has greatly impacted aboriginal culture throughout British Columbia (Sewid-Smith, 1991; McMillan & Yellowhorn, 2004; Muckle, 2007) and the residual effects of this are apparent within the Tahltan Nation. The area around the Tahltan Nation was first affected by the European fur

trade in the 1800s and later the Cassiar gold rush (Emmons, 1911). European contact brought disease that decimated aboriginal populations (Duff, 1997; Emmons; Muckle; Wilkes, 2006), land divestment and forcible removal, religious and cultural oppression, and assimilation and abuse in residential schools (Carr-Stewart, 2006; Muckle; Rothman, 2008; Wilkes). Since European contact, First Nations' artefacts have been expropriated, romanticized, and espoused as national heritage, even as the dispossession of native territories continues (Braun, 2002), creating an imposed disconnect between First Nations and their traditional culture. The *Indian Act*, enacted in 1876 by the federal government, has been decried as a deliberate attempt by the dominant power structure to contain aboriginal populations and maintain control of Canada's land and resources (Brooks & Jensen, 1991; Joseph, 1991; Littlejohn, 2008; Mathias & Yabsley, 1991; Muckle). Through the *Indian Act*, the federal government imposed its own band council system upon First Nations' traditional hereditary chiefs systems (Mathias & Yabsley, 1991; Muckle). By creating a complicated governmental system that overlapped traditional systems, colonizers created internal conflict and confusion amongst aboriginal communities, leading to division within the nations and a complex political system that continues to plague First Nations communities.

The Tahltan have accommodated more than a dozen researchers over the past century, beginning with well-known ethnographers like Franz Boas, George Emmons, and James Teit (Alderete & McIlwraith, 2008) around the turn of the 20th century (Thompson, 2007). As one of the most studied cultures in the world (Banerjee & Linstead, 2004), there is a sense among North American aboriginal populations that they have been "researched to death" (Brant Castellano, 2004). In many cases, this research resulted in the appropriation of cultural knowledge for commercial use (Fukuda-Parr, 2004; Muckle, 2007) and was disempowering to aboriginal groups (Banerjee & Linstead; Muckle) by placing aboriginals as subjects in academic studies from which they drew little benefit. At times, this legacy left by previous researchers in the Tahltan communities resulted in individuals declining to participate in this study.

Similarly, power imbalances, oppression, and misrepresentation are inherent in the mainstream news media's reporting on aboriginal issues (Harding, 2006; Rossiter, 2004). Traditionally, news stories revolve around conflict reported from a non-aboriginal perspective for a non-aboriginal audience, with coverage highlighting division between BC's

indigenous and non-native communities (Harding). While aboriginal populations have been studied, exploited, and theorized about, few researchers have included the indigenous perspective in their work (Peden-McAlpine & Struthers, 2005). Books set in northwestern BC like *Spatsizi* (Walker, 1976) and *Notes from the Century Before* (Hoagland, 1969) tended to focus on the frontier experience, painting their authors as intrepid adventurers and reducing the local aboriginal culture to an overly simplified, romanticized, and primitive version of itself. Hoagland's account of the Tahltan Nation during the mid-1900s is offensive in its demeaning description of aboriginal culture and, as a result, the Tahltan often balk at seeing themselves in print. In his more recent book *In the Land of the Red Goat*, Bob Henderson (2007) writes about his experience guiding Hoagland:

> [He] perceived his role as that of judge rather than chronicler. Several of these people fared rather badly in his book, *Notes from the Century Before*. The experience left them reluctant to share their stories ever again. In this way, one man's seeming arrogance has deprived subsequent generations of some of the country's most colourful history. (p. 45)

Dating back as far as the 1860s, aboriginal people took an interest in what was being written about them and frequently attempted to set the record straight, but their voices were rarely heard in news discourse (Harding, 2006).

Although the last remaining aspect of colonial policy was removed from the *Indian Act* in 1985 (Joseph, 1991), what remains is a postcolonial power differential between the colonizers and the colonized (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). The dominant media paradigm curtails First Nations' power to convey their own messages by removing the cultural and historical contexts from First Nations' knowledge and information in their reporting (Banerjee & Linstead, 2004), perpetuating a neocolonialist mediascape that continues into the 21st century. While neocolonialism most often refers to commercial dominance in previously colonized nations, which could best describe the relationship between First Nations and the resource extraction industry, the relationship between the aboriginal community and the mainstream news media is a cultural neocolonialism whereby the dominant culture is imposed (Zinkin, 1993) through news values. Banerjee and Linstead noted that "neocolonialism can be understood as a continuation of western colonialism without the traditional mechanism of expanding

frontiers and territorial control but with elements of political, economic and cultural control" (p. 227). In this way, Western colonialism continues not with imposed boundaries of traditional colonialism, but through invisible boundaries that prevent First Nations from having equal power within the public discussion arena. Within postcolonial theory there also lies the concept of hybridity, which examines the frontier between cultures (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Bhabha (1997) describes hybridity as "this state of acting from the midst of identities" (p. 438). The implications of the term's meaning have been debated (Drichel, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Gilroy, 2001) and at times described as racial mixing (Gilroy, 1993; Tanikella, 2003); However, for the purpose of this paper it applies to spaces that exist between varying cultures: Who occupies this hinterland, how is information transferred through it, and how can communication be improved within the interface between First Nation communities and the mainstream news media?

The Tahltan Nation has traditionally welcomed outsiders who objectified and oppressed their culture, creating a sense of mistrust within the nation that continues to this day. Twenty-five years after remaining colonial policies were removed from the *Indian Act*, as the BC government works to settle land claims, First Nations continue to see the divestment of their territories through industrial development. Aboriginal misrepresentation within the mainstream news media, apparent since European settlers first arrived in BC, continues through a lack of cultural context in reporting. As a result, First Nations have become disinclined to participate in a news media system that has traditionally misrepresented aboriginal interests to the greater population. If remote First Nations are to weigh equally in the province's economic and political arena, their voices must be given equal weight in the mainstream news media.

## Method and Analytical Framework

The inherent irony in any study relating to postcolonialism is that academic research itself acts as a form of neocolonialism (Banerjee & Linstead, 2004; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008), imposing Western research paradigms on a culture that invariably becomes objectified through its concentration into a form that is easily studied and transferable (Brant Castellano, 2004; Littlejohn & Foss). First Nations research is shifting from a practice where outsiders dictate solutions to one where aboriginal research participants facilitate their own solutions (McNaughton & Rock, 2002), as ethnographic researchers recognize the value and knowledge participants contribute about their own culture.

In keeping with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's (SSHRC) *Dialogue on Research and aboriginal Peoples* (McNaughton & Rock), this study used a collaborative ethnographic (Ahmed & Buchy, 2007; Buford & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; La Pastina, 2006) approach to promote involvement of both the aboriginal and news media communities. Data were then analysed using grounded theory method. The holistic nature of qualitative research and, specifically collaborative ethnography (Freeman, 2005), makes it an appropriate research method when working with both First Nations and journalists.

An analysis of past news reporting on the Sacred Headwaters included one television show, seven Internet articles, two radio reports, 30 daily and weekly newspaper articles, and three magazine articles. Data collection entailed 15 interviews with Tahltan spokespeople, journalists, and communications specialists involved with the Sacred Headwaters or other First Nations issues. Journalists and spokespeople were chosen according to their proximity and involvement in the Sacred Headwaters issue: journalists interviewed had written detailed reports about it and Tahltan participants were members of, or spokespeople for, the Klabona Keepers. Communications specialists interviewed had varying degrees of proximity to the issue: three were actively involved with the Sacred Headwaters campaign, while two did media relations for other First Nations in northwestern BC and the Vancouver area. All spokespeople interviewed were Tahltan, all journalists were non-aboriginal, and communications specialists were both aboriginal and non-aboriginal. Participants were invited to join this study via a letter outlining the project and a copy of the Participant Consent Form. Out of six journalists and six communications specialists approached to participate, one from each category was either unavailable or did not respond to the request. Out of nine Tahltan representatives identified, two declined and two were unavailable. Each participant was interviewed once, with interviews ranging from a half hour to two hours.

After making trips in June and September 2008 to the Tahltan territory to better understand the issues and build relationships with participants (Walliman, 2005), I visited Iskut and Dease Lake in March 2009 and conducted five audio recorded interviews with local residents involved with Sacred Headwaters coverage. Following this, I conducted audio-recorded telephone and in-person interviews with the journalists and communications specialists. A transcript of

each interview was then forwarded to each participant in person, by e-mail, or by mail for an opportunity to comment. Drafts of the completed paper were also sent to participants for feedback and only one participant, a journalist, requested a meeting to further discuss results.

Using grounded theory method to analyse data provided a less structured, more fluid approach to academic research, which complimented both aboriginal and journalism culture. In working with journalists, it provided a flexible framework from which to gather data, similar to that used by news reporters; as the aboriginal worldview is traditionally holistic and cyclical (McAlpine & Peden, 2005), grounded theory created a fitting research process by allowing the researcher to move cyclically between literature review, data collection, and analysis. As interviews were transcribed, emerging themes were recorded in a chart, with separate columns for related sub-themes and suggestions for additional literature review. Interview transcriptions were then analysed using line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). Recurring themes and sub-themes were identified and links determined between each category; thus, the neocolonial news cycle theory emerged (Dick, 2005). Literature was accessed throughout the research process as required (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006), and a second literature review was conducted as this overriding theory emerged.

## Results: Identifying a Neocolonial News Cycle

Throughout the interview process, three dominant and cyclically connected themes became apparent: traditional news values, bridging factors, and limiting factors (Figure 1). Sub-themes supporting traditional news values include the prevalence of conflict, the need for simplicity, and the importance of timeliness. Two bridging factors worked to mitigate these traditional news values: connection to place and relationships. Finally, the Tahltan Nation's remoteness combined with increasing financial restraints in the mainstream news media were two limiting factors that completed this cycle, returning reporting to its traditional news values.

### Defining Traditional News Values: Conflict, Simplicity, and Timeliness

Within coverage of the Sacred Headwaters issue, three values appeared most prominently: conflict, simplicity, and timeliness. These three values all linked back to the media's need to receive, process, and distribute news as efficiently and succinctly as possible. Presenting the conflict angle allowed

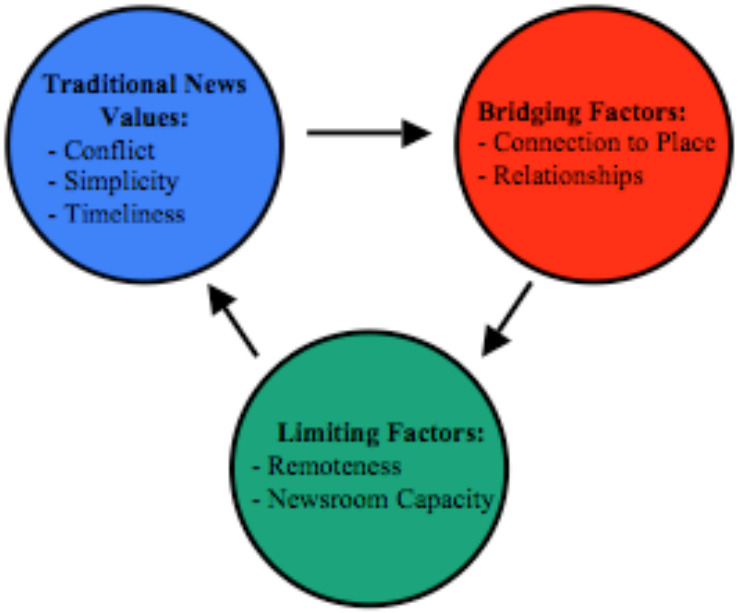


*Figure 1*. Defining a negative news cycle: Traditional news values, although occasionally overcome by a journalist's connection to place and value on relationships, are reinforced by the community's relative remoteness and declining capacity in the newsroom.

reporters to easily connect with audiences otherwise unfamiliar with the issue. Aboriginal and journalist participants referred to a common misperception that the Sacred Headwaters was "just another native uprising" or "just a bunch of corrupt Indians." This focus on controversy provides an overly simplified point from which readers can relate to the Sacred Headwaters. Focusing on controversy is one way the news media simplify a message to make it palatable to a broader audience. Similarly, the news media's need for simplicity in receiving and distributing information often led to the omission of deeper context about aboriginal culture and politics, which were often viewed as overly complex. Different approaches to time also deterred meaningful news coverage when deadline-driven reporters and aboriginal spokespeople were unable to align their schedules.

**Conflict.**

Out of 43 news pieces reviewed for this study, most focused on conflict. Headlines beginning "anger erupts" (Stueck, 2008) or "court looms" (Annandale, 2007) and stories starting with "grandchildren cried" (Carmichael, 2005) indicated that the mainstream news media took note during times of conflict. The press' focus on conflict at times alienated aboriginal communities. An aboriginal communications specialist described 27 negative news stories written about another First Nation over a six-week period: "Most First Nations don't want to deal with the media because most of the stories are all bad. They're all negative stories; there's crisis, there's corruption, there's a handful which media will cover." As a result, the rift between First Nations and the mainstream news media has become self-perpetuating.

One Tahltan spokesperson indicated that reporters were simply responding to market demand: "It's based on what sells, really. Good news doesn't sell. [The media] wanted trash." Another Tahltan spokesperson further noted that a focus on road blockades and internal strife depicted the nation as a "bunch of troublemakers." A communications specialist involved with the issue similarly discussed what makes news: "If you have First Nations blockading a road and risking arrest, then you have a news story. It's like those things that make a news story, right: action, emotion, and conflict." A communications specialist working within another First Nation discussed a different aboriginal rights issue that was not being picked up by the mainstream news media: "It's a tougher story. You know, it's not simple. There's no conflict.

There's no nice, concise conflict." He further noted, "the way stories are framed, the way stories are chosen, the whole view of what makes a story, of conflict, that is all based in a set of values that's all part of a dominant culture." Stories reported in keeping with dominant media culture are more likely be published, read, and understood. As a result, he noted, "[the First Nation is] presenting a story in a way that we know will get picked up by mainstream media, but it might not be … doing justice to the story, perhaps."

While aboriginal participants expressed displeasure with, and mistrust of, news reporters because of this focus on conflict, some also expressed a willingness to work within these parameters, delivering stories considered newsworthy by the mainstream press in the hopes that it would lead to greater coverage and deeper understanding of sustainability issues. One Tahltan spokesperson noted that, "one of the vehicles we used [to get the story out] was corruption. … That's what [the news media] want. That's the reality. And that's what we gave them." He added, "when you need the media, whether you trust them or not, you're going to use them. The more you got out the better." Another spokesperson added that although she did not necessarily trust the media, in the case of the Sacred Headwaters, "the message got out there. It was what we wanted." Tahltan spokespeople and communications specialists recognized conflict as the news hook that could potentially draw a journalist into the issue, eventually leading to more meaningful coverage. However, focusing on negative news contributes to the rift between remote First Nation communities and the mainstream news media, often not doing justice to the underlying story. By focusing on the conflict angle, a reporter could deliver a news story simply to the general public and negate researching its deeper context, omitting any deeper, province-wide, cross-cultural understanding.

**Simplicity.**

Restraints on time and resources were often cited as reasons why news reporters needed to receive a story in its simplest format, which could then be passed on to audiences in an easily digestible manner. Unrealistically, this often led to news media outlets expecting First Nations to deliver a unified party line similar to a corporate entity or political party. The Tahltan was a divided nation on the Sacred Headwaters issue, which meant that news reporters were additionally tasked with gathering information from a variety of perspectives and spokespeople. Instead of taking up this challenge, reporters shied away from the story, and the

complexities of First Nations politics were often blamed for turning news reporters away from the issue. A Tahltan spokesperson noted, "It's like they don't want to tell the whole story. Maybe they just didn't want to get involved with the whole native politics thing." One communications specialist expressed frustration over a reporter who covered the Sacred Headwaters issue only once: "When we'd try and figure out why they wouldn't cover it a second time, they'd say, 'Well, because we became aware that there was this split in the Tahltan community and a split community is not a story'." Participants often raised the "David and Goliath" metaphor: news reports tended to reduce the dispute to a small, dissident group fighting the provincial government and a multi-national oil and gas corporation. What made news, and people could connect and relate to in the urban areas, was the fight of the underdog. But when David was divided on the acceptance of Goliath, news value was greatly diminished. As an ENGO communications person noted:

> The public is capable of hearing a story—David versus Goliath. The big bully comes in and stomps on the indigenous people. That's about as much attention as the public has. If it becomes more complicated, such as, the company coming in and stomping in the local people, but actually half the local people like it, half don't like it, and they're split, then immediately people [will] turn off. End of story.

By creating a good guys/bad guys scenario, the Klabona Keepers were often successful in getting their story covered. One Tahltan spokesperson noted, "Typically [the media] want to back up the good guys. We were the good guys. … Corruption is bad, so here's the good guys fighting the bad guys." This simplified the message for reporters, who could then deliver it in a package easily accepted by the public. Understanding the deeper issues behind First Nations politics make demands on something in short supply for reporters: time.

**Timeliness.**

News media outlets are accustomed to collecting a succinct message in the shortest amount of time and delivering it almost simultaneously to a waiting audience. As one communications specialist noted, "Media doesn't have a lot of time to invest and it's always been a problem. The media deals with cultures that run on different clocks." First Nations culture traditionally operates on polychronic time. Facetiously referred to as "Indian time," polychronic time is more fluid, adheres less to schedule, and integrates work and social time (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, &

Simonds, 2007). Cultures operating on polychronic time typically put family needs ahead of previously scheduled events. For example, aboriginal communities become largely inaccessible during times of grief and mourning. Additionally, differing lifestyles mean that during certain seasons the Tahltan are more likely to be out in the territory than next to a phone. One Tahltan spokesperson, referring to a Vancouver-based reporter, noted:

> He was calling here, but I wasn't here, and he was like, "Well I tried calling you but you never called me back." I wasn't even here! Then he started sending these e-mails. It didn't start off very good. Then he wanted to put something in there on our behalf, which we didn't even say.

Being unavailable for interviews during breaking news often conflicts with the mainstream news media's deadline-oriented approach to time. Newsroom clocks operate on monochronic time, proceeding linearly and focusing on schedule (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, & Simonds). One communications specialist noted, "When a reporter would phone up and say, 'I need somebody now,' that's an unreal expectation. Sometimes, depending on what's happening now, now might be when everybody's out fishing." A journalist similarly noted, "I'll make 25 phone calls and if there's something going on that day, if there's a feast, a funeral, a court case, or in the case of the Sacred Headwaters, they were all out at the camp." Deadline-focused journalists submit news stories as they develop, often omitting an aboriginal perspective. When it came to negotiating the sometimes-complex issues of First Nations politics, time constraints were blamed for causing reporters to avoid issues like the Sacred Headwaters. Journalists who provided in-depth coverage of the issue expressed a desire to improve social justice through their reporting and shed light on inherent human rights infringements. This often stemmed from two elements: connection to place and the importance of relationships.

**Bridging Factors between First Nations and the Mainstream News Media**

The second theme that emerged was the ability of some journalists to successfully transcend these traditional news values through building relationships forming a connection to place. By spending time in the territory, journalists were able to unravel the complexities of First Nation politics, develop meaningful relationships that lead to more in-depth reporting, and build a connection to place that bonded the reporter, and subsequently the audience, with the cultural, ecological, and historical context inherent in

the landscape. Trust was, at times, bridged simply by spending time in the community and listening for hours, days, or weeks before the journalist would broach the topic of an interview. One journalist described a two-hour drive from Dease Lake to Telegraph Creek with a Tahltan elder, which occurred entirely in silence: "She doesn't say a thing to me, doesn't look at me," he remembered. Upon arriving in Telegraph Creek, "about 10 minutes later another elder walks out and says, of this first woman, 'She says you're a very nice man, we can trust you, and so we'd like to talk to you'." A Tahltan spokesperson, speaking about the same journalist, described how the journalist took time to develop relationships before engaging in formal interviews:

> He started eating with us, was at the blockade all the time, not sticking a mic in anybody's face, just being with us—what's it called, participant observation—and going away at night and writing about it. It was way better than sitting around and interviewing anyone. … And in his article he never romanticized all that, because he lived a part of it.

By simply demonstrating a willingness to better understand aboriginal issues, non-aboriginals can begin to bridge cultural differences. Putting in the time to develop trust resulted in reports, such as this one, that carried meaning beyond the immediate conflict story and better communicated aboriginal sustainability concerns to the general public.

**Connection to place.**

Having been raised on the land where their ancestors lived and hunted for generations, the Tahltan feel a deep connection to the land and a strong sense of place on Tahltan territory. One Tahltan spokesperson said:

> I mean, we have roots. To us, one of the things I can't fathom is how someone could grow up in suburban Ontario and how their kids grow up and they sell their house and everyone disperses and there is no roots. You know? You could go back, but you could never go back to your house.

Another Tahltan spokesperson described her first visit to the Klappan, where she saw her ancestors in a vision:

> I could feel the power. The energy was coming through me and before I knew it I was standing there, my hands went out like this [holds arms out] and I started to pray and I just went around in this circle… I got the vision of these

> five Tahltan women, seemed like they came right up and appeared right in front of me.

The desire from journalists to meaningfully portray the Sacred Headwaters often came from a personal connection to the place: They shared stories of experiences that led to personal connections with the Sacred Headwaters that put them in a better position to relate to the Tahltan's connection to place. Out of five journalists interviewed, four were self-employed freelancers who were able to visit the region to research their stories. They described, "why I love the Stikine so much and why I consider it my home"; another said he had "driven through the region decades ago as a young man and it just stuck with me"; yet another enthused, "I love Iskut and I love the people there." Another, who worked for a major daily newspaper and was unable to visit during the Sacred Headwaters dispute, said, "I have visited Iskut on my private time. A couple times I've been up through Iskut and Dease Lake and travelled all through that country up there so I know it personally." Stemming from this connection, one journalist expressed his desire "to give a sense of the feel of the place. Not just the stories, not just what the people looked like, but that sensation that we call the feeling of the place." Overwhelmingly, participants discussed the importance of spending time in the community with comments such as "it's essential, absolutely essential, to have been there" and "I don't know that you would get a very good story if you didn't visit."

While a journalist who visits the area will likely never feel the connection of the Tahltan, experiencing the Klappan often came about during personal time and motivated journalists to try to communicate the feeling of place to the general public. A communications specialist said, about one journalist who had spent time in the area for over a decade, "he knew the community well, so he did a good job of dealing with the complexities of the issues and being respectful in how he gathers the information and presents it." Through this desire to communicate the deeper issue, journalists delve beyond the simple conflict story and attempt to give context and depth to sustainability issues. Their connection to place not only helps to adequately portray the landscape the Klabona Keepers strive to protect, it assists in building a connection with the community. Spending time in the area helps a journalist understand the local politics and culture, giving depth to a story that goes beyond the simple conflict angle. Most importantly, visiting the community builds valuable relationships.

**Relationships.**

As a collectivist culture, First Nations place a high value on relationships and kinship (Calloway-Thomas, Cooper & Simonds, 2007; Duff, 1997; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Trust is a belief in the integrity of others and can only be developed over time and sustained through proven good will. Only when trust is present in a relationship will there be a more meaningful exchange of information. While First Nations culture relies on trust built through time-honoured relationships, a successful relationship within news media culture might amount to short, sporadic telephone conversations that result in an efficient exchange of information. As a result, stories written by journalists who spent extended periods of time within the Tahltan communities, establishing relationships, showing respect, and learning about the issues, were generally more in-depth and better received by local residents.

Two journalists who wrote about the Sacred Headwaters had previously established relationships with the Tahltan. One noted, "when you get those calls, you know, you have to go, because I have a strong history with these people, and I know the land." Establishing a meaningful relationship often meant blurring the lines between business and personal. One ENGO representative noted:

> Industry gives [the Tahltan] a study or a proposal, and they give the Tahltan 45 days to respond. Well that doesn't work, right? They don't know this company. They don't know who they are, where they come from, if they have kids, if they love their kids, if they're good people. They want a relationship. … It's the same I would say with media, with anybody. They want to look you in the eye and shake your hand and see how you respond.

Conversely, one Tahltan spokesperson talked about a reporter who threatened to run the Tahltan Nation's perspective without speaking to anyone within the nation: "He was rude on the Internet, so we just said, 'We don't have to deal with you. We don't have to give an interview'." The reporter's demand for information had detrimental effects on his ability to build a relationship, therefore having a negative effect on the resulting story. Another communications specialist expressed the importance of having "allies" in the media: "For those allies it's important to come to the territories because then they can establish a trusting relationship." Participants speaking from both the First Nations and news media perspectives advocated the "cup of coffee" approach to fostering communication: taking time to develop relationships outside a

working environment to foster understanding of who the other is as a person. Tahltan elders in particular expressed a preference for communicating in person:

> I think my ideal situation is what we are doing now—sitting and talking and making sure it gets into the paper, into the media. That's exactly how I feel. I'll be honest and open with you about what's happening here, right now.

Journalists who spent time in the community incorporated deeper context into their writing and their stories were better received within the community. The communications specialist who worked for a Vancouver-area First Nation described how a reporter altered the nation's public image by coming to the community and writing an in-depth piece about its progress and culture. The same reporter, however, was unable to visit the Sacred Headwaters due to time constraints and was limited to writing his stories from a desk in Vancouver. With the recent reduction of resources within the news media and increased demands on reporters' time, visiting remote areas and building relationships is likely to become increasingly difficult.

**Limiting Factors between First Nations and the Mainstream News Media**

Despite some journalists' best efforts to visit the Tahltan communities and build relationships, a third theme arose that challenged the above-mentioned bridging factors, returning this negative news cycle to its traditional news values. The distance to rural First Nations combined with dwindling newsrooms resources are likely to increasingly restrict reporters' travel and time. Cursory reporting on First Nations issues from a Vancouver office is a likely result.

**Remoteness.**

The physical distance separating the Tahltan territory from the Lower Mainland creates a gaping rift between the First Nation's concerns and those who might listen and react. Very few British Columbians have laid eyes on the Sacred Headwaters, despite its ecological importance for the province. This physical distance made travel difficult for news reporters wanting to visit the area in person; this distance also resulted in apathy from urban editors and news outlets and a disconnect between Tahltan spokespeople and the news stories that were being produced.

As one journalist put it, "One of the reasons these areas remain off the radar is because they're difficult to get to, both for those who might discover them and those who might write about them." As a result, journalists who have visited the area are tasked with communicating its vastness and beauty to an unseeing audience: "I keep in mind that a

lot of my readers don't actually get out in the old growth forests or haven't spent any time, actually on a salmon river," one journalist said. Some journalists experienced resistance from editors, who told them that "[the Sacred Headwaters] really doesn't have any relevance in the Lower Mainland." A journalist, who did not visit the area while writing about the story, cited logistics as a limiting factor: "It's going to take a reporter a week to go in there and actually talk to people and see the area. So, for those of us here in the big city, it is remote." While encouraging journalists to visit the territory in-person initially seemed like a viable solution, it became increasingly apparent that, in today's economic climate, financially strapped news outlets would be less willing to send correspondents to remote areas.

**Newsroom capacity.**

As newsroom budgets dwindle, layoffs at news outlets continue, and reporters are given a greater number of tasks to complete in less time, it seems likely that journalists will find it increasingly difficult to bridge time and distance barriers by visiting the Tahltan Nation, developing relationships, and better understanding the deeper issues. Inevitably, when the suggestion was raised during interviews that better understanding of First Nations issues could be gained by having more journalists visit the territories, the discussion returned to the limiting factor of dwindling newsroom capacity.

Out of the five journalists who were interviewed, four were freelancers and one worked for a major daily newspaper; two of the freelancers were able to obtain assignments from magazines prior to their visit, while two visited the nation in the hopes of later interesting publications about the story. The journalist working for a major daily newspaper and was unable to visit it while reporting on the issue noted:

> I think I sometimes tried to go, but it's been—we have a small bureau here and to get away for—the big trouble with Sacred Headwaters and some other areas in the province do stories on … is you can't just go and get a story in a day, because of the travel time.

Underscoring the limited capacity in today's newsrooms, one communications specialist noted:

> They were talking about 600 or 1,200 people being laid off from CBC and it's gotten even worse to be a reporter these days, so the more you can make it easier for a reporter—I don't like the word spoon-fed—but in recognition that reporters are totally overcommitted and overworked, if you can present the

> story and the right contacts when they call in an easily digestible manner, then you're going to get the coverage.

This hits upon an opportunity that arises when media outlets face dwindling capacity. As the journalist at a major daily commented, "I've got so many assignments on my desk here in the morning that I really count on people to either send me an e-mail or make a quick phone call." It became apparent that, although news reporters might be less able to visit the nation in-person, media savvy communications people who could package the story in a palatable format often got coverage. Dwindling resources in newsrooms created not just a barrier, but an opportunity for First Nations looking to increase awareness about sustainability.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Once identified, the question remains of how to break the neocolonial news cycle and infuse greater depth into reporting on First Nations concerns. This is where the postcolonial theory concept of hybridity applies to bridging cultural barriers between First Nations and the mainstream news media. Community members have existing relationships and a connection to place. One journalist, an independent filmmaker covering the Sacred Headwaters issue, noted that by using local cameramen, he was able to draw greater depth and discussion from his Tahltan sources. Individuals capable of acting as a conduit between these two distinct cultures can deliver First Nations' messages to the general public. Journalists who spend time in the community can partially fulfil this role, but ultimately First Nations stories are best told from within the nation.

By taking the time to experience place and build relationships, journalists can relay greater depth and cultural context in their reporting. Examples of this include *National Geographic* article "Deep North" (Davis, 2004) or *The Walrus* piece "A Gentle Revolution" (Paulsen, 2006). These examples of high quality journalism prove that by investing the time it takes to cross cultural boundaries and connect with a community, journalists can produce high-profile work benefiting both themselves and First Nations. Journalists are rewarded not only by furthering human rights and environmental issues but by gaining the recognition that comes with well-researched reporting. It is hoped that these individuals can be a model for others in their field, particularly at a time when freelance journalism is growing as large media corporations reduce staff. However, it must also be recognized that this is not always possible: Newsroom cutbacks mean greater workloads for full-time reporters and the

average freelance journalist earns $24,000 a year (Canadian Professional Writers Survey, 2006). This can make travelling to remote First Nation communities cost prohibitive.

Time and money restraints within urban newsrooms can benefit rural First Nations. Building hybridity by increasing media capacity within the nation allows indigenous groups to tailor their message for the mainstream media and can break the negative news cycle (Figure 2). A dedicated spokesperson should be easily accessible, available during breaking news, and able to either provide reliable information or connect news reporters with the appropriate person in a timely manner, satisfying reporters' need for simplicity in connecting with sources and receiving a streamlined message within a short period of time. Someone who bridges the cultural gap can lead to aboriginal self-representation, political assertion, and cultural revival (Evans, 2002). In this way, First Nations can take control of their portrayal in the mainstream news media. If aboriginal interests continue to be underrepresented by the mainstream news media, First Nations are likely to find themselves trapped in a dominant news cycle that fails to engage provincial politicians and decision-makers in discussions of most interest to indigenous groups. As such, remote First Nation communities will continue to have their stories told by outside groups, continuing a neocolonial dynamic that has persisted since first contact.

## Conclusion

Despite successes in bringing environmental concerns to the attention of average British Columbians through the Sacred Headwaters issue, the Tahltan First Nation continues to exist within a mediascape reflective of its colonial past. A Tahltan history of disenfranchisement, negative media portrayal, and division within the nation continues through dominant news values favouring short, timely news stories often punctuated by conflict. That culture is primarily, though not exclusively, white, male, affluent, middle-aged, and educated (Rothman, 2008), continuing a power differential similar to that experienced by the Tahltan since colonization. Newsrooms function on a clock that favours schedules and deadlines, making little allowances for rural aboriginal lifestyles. As a result, news coverage surrounding the Sacred Headwaters largely revolved around conflict, foregoing the deeper context of

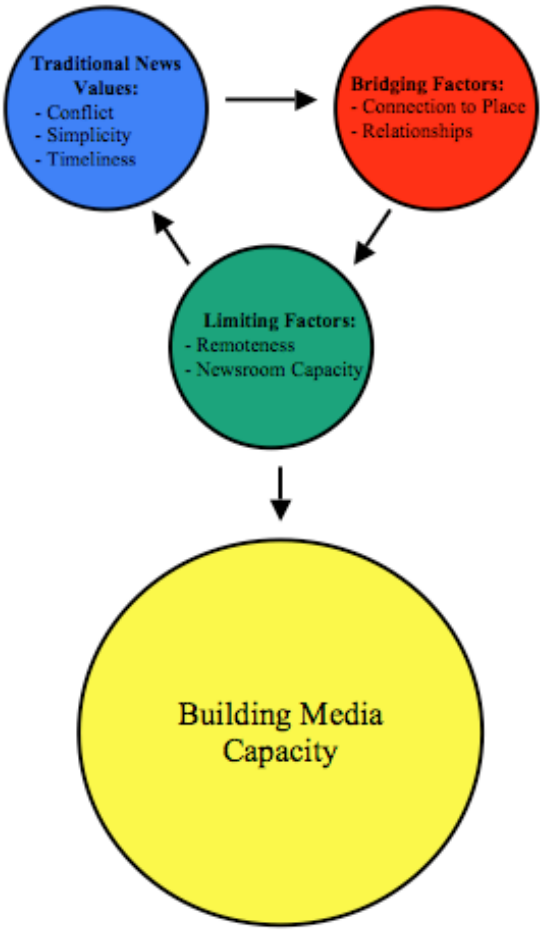


*Figure 2*. Breaking the negative news cycle: Building media capacity and empowerment to achieve greater internal and external communication.

aboriginal rights and ecological sustainability in news reporting.

Throughout Sacred Headwaters media coverage, reports that provided deeper cultural context were developed by journalists familiar with the community, people, and landscape. As shrinking newsroom budgets will likely restrict journalists from visiting remote First Nations, breaking the neocolonial news cycle will rely on hybridity: independent journalists must be prepared to invest the time and lead change, and First Nations must increase media capacity from within their communities. First Nations can communicate environmental concerns in a way that is contextually representative of lifestyle, culture, and sustainability by building media capacity to send a strong and unified message to a wider audience.

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