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Special Issue: Native American History through Newspapers

Gyorgy Toth and Brian Hosmer

- 1 For decades, scholarship in Indigenous Studies has grappled with using and interpreting newspapers, journals, and other forms of printed media. Questions of voice, authority, and purpose interweave with the instruments and articulations of colonialism. They also speak to misplaced and misleading binaries that situate Indigenous peoples at odds with modernity, in this sense through modes of communication. To be sure, media distorts voice, often representing the colonial gaze. Still, even the most mediated sources can prove useful as historical documents, sometimes revealing Native constructions of the world, engagements with modernity, and including the deployment of colonialist systems of communication and memory to serve Indigenous ends. While there is a continuing need for the mapping of colonialism through print culture, it is also crucial that Native American History and Indigenous Studies be informed by rigorous studies of Native American world-making through print.
- 2 The foundations of such studies were laid in the 1980s, when, in quick succession, James E. and Sharon M. Murphy published their *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (1981), James P. Danky and Maureen Hady produced their *Native American Periodicals and Newspapers, 1828-1982* (1984), and Daniel Littlefield and James Parins brought out their *American Indian and Alaska Native Newspapers and Periodicals, 1971-1985* (1984-86). These volumes were outstanding and generative even given their shortcomings.¹ Murphy and Murphy produced a brilliant overview, first establishing the denigrating politics of representations of Native Americans in the U.S. mainstream press, then tracing the then 150-year history of Native journalism, through its 1970s proliferation into electronic media, and into the institutionalization of Native American print media and beyond.² Littlefield and Parins' three volumes provided the publication histories of the many periodicals flowering in this latter period,³ and exchanged much information with the project of Danky and Hady, whose work through the early 21st century remained a most definitive list of titles.⁴ Their scholarship sit alongside later

studies in the history of Native American print cultures such as Phillip H. Round's 2010 book *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663-1880*.⁵

- 3 Other threads compliment this work. Media scholar John Coward highlighted how nineteenth-century print journalism, through words and images, created and perpetuated stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as standing in the way of economic growth and national expansion. Historians have focused on the skillful use of print media by Indigenous political and cultural actors. Alexandra Harmon's *Rich Indians* (2010) examined historical moments when Native individuals or communities held real wealth, disrupting dominant stereotypes about Native peoples as "poor," "worthless," and "irrelevant." Frederick E. Hoxie's *This Indian Country* (2013) profiled Native American lawyers, lobbyists, writers, and politicians who opposed U.S. oppression with words and ideas sharply challenging paternalistic policies and ideologies of progress.⁶
- 4 Together, these scholars clearly established the variety and periods of American Indian and Alaska Native print cultures. Most scholars date the beginning of Native periodicals at least as early as the 1828 establishment of the *Cherokee Phoenix*.⁷ Subsequently, the 19th century saw the appearance of 200-250 Native newspapers.⁸ The most clearly settler colonial mechanisms of print were the turn-of-the-century federally sponsored Indian (reservation) agency papers and the Indian boarding school periodicals.⁹ Progressive Era Indigenous serial imprints included Carlos Montezuma's (Yavapai-Apache) reformist newsletter *Wassaja*, and Gertrude Bonnin / Zitkala Sa's (Yankton Dakota) *American Indian Magazine*.¹⁰ During the Great Depression, publications sponsored by the Indian Office featured many Indigenous writers and artists. Long dismissed as examples of colonialist ventriloquism, anthropologist Mindy J. Morgan revealed how Indigenous communities strategically used the documentary power of the Collierist newsletter *Indians at Work* to challenge dominant tropes about indigeneity during a period of major political and social change.¹¹
- 5 The post-1934 tribal governments' BIA-induced financial sway over tribal newspapers constrained their freedom of the press.¹² While the post-World War II relocation programs eventually produced demands for urban Native papers,¹³ the mid-century social movements also helped fuel "the Indian underground press," which produced low-profile, often mimeographed papers, trying to change tribal policy and calling for justice.¹⁴ From the 1960s, at least 60 periodicals, newspapers, and newsletters were published by tribes in 23 states and intertribal organizations.¹⁵ By the 1970s, buttressed by federal community development funding and the turn to Self-Determination, the Native press mushroomed into about 400 periodicals of all kinds, Native programming in about 100 radio and several television stations, six of the last category also Native-owned.¹⁶ Non-recognized tribes also published their own newsletters, such as the Lumbee's *The Carolina Indian Voice*,¹⁷ and a pan-tribal press articulated concerns shared across Native America.¹⁸ Among the latter were avowedly Red Power papers such as the second *Wassaja*,¹⁹ *Americans Before Columbus*, and the *Akwesasne Notes*²⁰—which articulated a transnational Indigenous consciousness and concern.
- 6 Yet by the early 1980s, many Native periodicals struggled under a lack of training and independent funding, thus being constrained in reporting freely.²¹ In response, the establishment of the American Indian Press Association in 1970 and the formation of the Native American Journalists Association in 1984 consolidated the resources of the media in Indian Country.²² Between 1985 and the early 21st century, Native journalism grew greatly—due to tribal economic growth, increasing professionalism among

journalists, and a growing sense of tribal sovereignty. For the last 30 years, both national organs such as the *Lakota Times*—turned *Indian Country Today*,²³ *News from Indian Country*, the born-digital *Native News Online*²⁴ and *Indianz.com*,²⁵ and tribal newspapers have been communicating core sovereignty issues, including environmental concerns, economic development, and pushback against the demeaning ‘Indian’ stereotypes from several waves of backlash against Native rights.²⁶

- 7 In her 1981 foreword to Murphy and Murphy’s historical study, Jeanette Henry Costo (Eastern Cherokee) boldly asserted that

With the development of modern print journalism, Indian scholars and writers eagerly embraced the media, producing newspapers and magazines that delineate the modern history of the American Indian often far better and more accurately than anthropological studies. Historians must perforce make a special effort to examine these historic documents if they are to understand Indian history.²⁷

- 8 Costo was writing from a specific period and personal politics in Native American journalism, education, and historianship, and we appreciate her overstatement even as we recognize how much print culture and anthropology were both developed by and typically served dominant settler colonialism. Her claim served to shift and keep the focus on Native agency through the press—a real value in studies in the last 50 years. As more recent paradigms, both Settler Colonial Studies and Indigenous Studies influence the study of Native American history and cultures through newspapers. Settler Colonial Studies illuminates the ways in which the U.S. mainstream press has denigrated, caricatured, delegitimized, erased, and, in Patrick Wolfe’s words, “eliminated” Native peoples from society both as individual human beings and as collective political entities.²⁸ Yet Indigenous Studies—practitioners of which have been advancing the field in the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association for the last two decades²⁹—can recover the myriad ways in which Native people and their nations have practiced what journalist-turned scholar Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) has called *survivance*³⁰—how they have subverted, inhabited, wielded, and remade some print cultures on their own terms, and in their own image.

- 9 This journal special issue joins a cohort of recent and imminent publications. Arising from the early 21st-century field of Periodical Studies³¹, and run by Oliver Scheiding between 2020–24 at the University of Mainz, Germany, the DFG-funded “Periodicals and Indigenous Modernity: Building a Text Corpus of American Indian Magazines, 1890–1930” grant project has published and contributed to a number of outputs.³² These include a whole 2023 special issue of *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* on Indigenous periodicals³³ as well as Scheiding and Frank Newton’s 2024 article “Native American Periodicals: The Art and Politics of Early Twentieth-Century Indigenous Printscapes.”³⁴ Using the Deleuzian concept of *assemblage* to theorize Indigenous periodicals, these works focus on late 19th- and early 20th-century Indigenous periodicals, ending their period in the 1930s, just as ours begins—a neat chronological and productive scholarly division of labor that occurred without any planning on our part.

- 10 Co-edited by Jill Doerfler, Oliver Scheiding, and Cristina Stanciu and to be published in late 2026 by the University of Nebraska Press, the book *Indigenous Media Ecologies* promises to be a robust and important contribution to the field. This work takes a wide scope, and as a theoretical intervention, it conceptualizes Indigenous engagement,

agency, world and home making through old and new Western-derived communication media.³⁵

- 11 Our special journal issue brings together scholars who examine the potential of newspapers, periodicals, and related media for a diversity of interpretations of Native American history. Our contributions range from critiques of settler colonialism and its subversions in periodical cultures to the decolonization of interpretation with Indigenous methodologies—by Indigenous as well as non-Native scholars.
- 12 One common thread in all our articles is an emphasis among Native periodical editors and writers on building and representing their communities, either in response to the oppression of ongoing colonialism or for strengthening Native peoples as nations with self-determination. Settler scholar and former director of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies Brian Hosmer fills in the chronological gap in recent and imminent publications by scrutinizing the Wind River Reservation BIA superintendent's newsletter, *The Wyoming Indian*, for its visual and textual politics of non-Native versus Native perspectives on labor during the Great Depression under John Collier's Indian New Deal.³⁶ Settler scholar Amanda Johnson's study amplifies how the female editors and writers of the *Indian Center News* used their reporting for community building and services in the Native Seattle of the 1960s.³⁷ White Earth Ojibwe direct descendant scholar Sasha Maria Suarez discusses Native Americans' resistance to settler colonial "Indian expertise" through their interventions on the pages of Minneapolis newspapers in the 1960s and '70s.³⁸
- 13 Several of our studies also trace the diversification of news coverage in the Native press from tribal and reservation issues to pan-Indian organizations and struggles, into transnational and global Indigenous activism. Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde member Jennifer O'Neal analyses the coverage of the revived *Wassaja* of the 1970s, showing that even at the height of militant Red Power, the newspaper carefully covered reservations, treaty rights, and moderate and grassroots activism for Native rights and Indian policy legislation across the United States and, over time, internationally.³⁹ European scholar Gyorgy Toth's study of the *Akwesasne Notes* further shifts the geographies of news coverage from Native peoples in the interstices of the settler colonial nation-states to a global scope and, eventually, to building solidarity in the transatlantic realm in the 1970s.⁴⁰
- 14 Finally, settler scholar and former managing editor of *Indian Country Today* James Ring Adams' recollection piece takes this issue into the early 21st century. Through the lens of establishing and maintaining journalistic credibility and integrity, Adams provides insider insights into the shifts in *ICT*'s role from a regional paper to a tribal-directed national Native periodical.⁴¹
- 15 Editors and contributors unequivocally assert our commitment to foreground the voices and interpretations of Indigenous scholars whose expertise has been too long distorted and exploited by settler colonialist knowledge production. The line-up of this special issue's editors and contributors is the result of good intentions confronted with our own respective availabilities, deadlines, and diverse publication pipelines. Importantly, we recommend that you read the full books being published by our early-career colleagues: Sasha Maria Suarez's *Ojibwe in the City: White Earth Women and Community Organizing in Minneapolis* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming in 2026), Jennifer O'Neal's *Out of the Shadows: Native American International Resurgence, 1975-1980* (Yale University Press, Henry Roe Cloud Series, forthcoming, 2026).

- 16 Access is a key issue in the study of Native American newspapers, as well as newspapers revealing aspects of Native histories. This is improving all too slowly. Hard-fought activism, waves of public attention, and moral pressure to address the injustices of the assimilationist Indian boarding school system have led to the digitization of several collections of school records, such as the Sherman schools,⁴² Carlisle,⁴³ Haskell,⁴⁴ and the National Indian Boarding School Digital Archive⁴⁵—many of these include the schools' serial publications. However, as Stanciu and her colleagues point out, of the hundreds of historical newspapers in the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database, only seven are Native periodicals. The periodicals featured in the American Indian Digital History Project by the University of Kansas,⁴⁶ the Native American Newspapers at the Oklahoma Historical Society,⁴⁷ JSTOR's Native American Publication Collection from Grand Valley State University,⁴⁸ and the Native American section of JSTOR's Independent Voices⁴⁹ are still more the exception than the rule. Major digital databases such as Adam Matthew's Indigenous Newspapers in North America,⁵⁰ Alexander Street's North American Indian Thought and Culture,⁵¹ ProQuest's Ethnic NewsWatch,⁵² or Gale's Indigenous Peoples of North America⁵³ are all behind paywalls that require subscription, pricing such resources out of the means of non-Western educational and research institutions, and effectively, in true settler colonialist fashion, by default denying Native Americans a fundamental expression of their own cultures and communication. Hard-copy archival collections such as the Sequoyah National Research Center's American Native Press Archives at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock,⁵⁴ the Library of Congress,⁵⁵ and the Wisconsin Historical Society⁵⁶ are geographically bound, closer to some Native nations than others, and require intercontinental travel for researchers outside North America. Hopefully, collections such as the Native American Educational Services College Digital Library Project will help improve access.⁵⁷
- 17 Our special issue is the product of a series of intermediate presentations at professional conferences, all designed to encourage interaction between contributors. While time, geography, competing professional obligations, and tightening university budgets proved challenging, we all benefited from interactions at the Scottish Association for the Study of America's 25th anniversary conference (University of Stirling, 2023), the 45th American Indian Workshop (Pardubice, Czech Republic, 2024), the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Conference (Bodø, Norway, 2024), and the British Association for American Studies (digital, 2024).
- 18 Finally, a word on terminology. Here we have indicated only the tribal affiliation of the historical figures and scholars as we know of them—largely unmarked are settler colonist and non-U.S. figures and scholars. The non-Native scholars among us are not in the business of investigating or adjudicating claims to Native descent or affiliation. Our focus is the history of Native Americans, that is, Indigenous peoples persisting in the settler colonial United States, through newspapers. We recognize that these are members of the larger categories of Native North American and global Indigenous populations, nations, and ethnicities, many of them under settler colonial nation states. Our contributors have free rein to define and use their terms as it best suits their studies and commitments. While our definitions are inclusive—we recognize the scholarly value of settler colonial periodicals for illuminating some aspects of Native history—we are especially interested in the print culture created, edited, and written by and for Native Americans.

NOTES

1. As Toth points out in his article (current issue), the *Akwesasne Notes* did not make it into Littlefield and Parins' compendium—even though it had been soaring in readership in Native America and beyond for years. Daniel F. Littlefield and James W. Parins, eds., *American Indian and Alaska Native Newspapers and Periodicals, 1971-1985* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986). For their part, Littlefield and Parins pointed out that the Murphys' book was incomplete in its treatment of pre-1970 publications. Daniel E. Littlefield, Jr. and James W. Parins, "Native American Press in Wisconsin and the Nation, 1982 to the Present," *Library Trends* 56, no. 3 (2008): 618-634, 625.
2. James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), xix.
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4. J. P. Danky & M. E. Hady, eds, *Native American Periodicals and Newspapers 1828-1982* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984).
5. Phillip H. Round, *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country, 1663-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
6. John M. Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); John M. Coward, *Indians Illustrated: The Image of Native Americans in the Pictorial Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Alexandra Harmon, *Rich Indians: Native Americans and the Problem of Wealth in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Frederick E. Hoxie, *This Indian Country: American Indian Activists and the Place They Made* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).
7. Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, vi, xix; Cristina Stanciu, Oliver Scheiding, and Jill Doerfler, "'You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire': The Cultural and Political Work of Indigenous Periodicals," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*, 33, no. 2 (2023): 93-118, 94, 99; Oliver Scheiding and Frank Newton, "Native American Periodicals: The Art and Politics of Early Twentieth-Century Indigenous Printscapes," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 69, no. 2 (2024): 111-132, 111. For more on scholarly studies of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, see Littlefield and Parins, "Native American Press," 624.
8. Scheiding and Newton, "Native American Periodicals," 111; Stanciu, Scheiding, and Doerfler, "'You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire,'" 99.
9. Stanciu, Scheiding, and Doerfler, "'You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire,'" 94, 98. For some scholarly studies of boarding school publications, see Jacqueline Emery, ed., *Recovering Native American Writings in the Boarding School Press* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Alyssa A. Hunziker, "'Battlefield and Classroom': Indigenous Student-Soldiers and US Imperialism in the Carlisle Indian School Press," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 33, no. 2 (2023): 152-171.
10. Stanciu, Scheiding, and Doerfler, "'You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire,'" 94, 105; Scheiding and Newton, "Native American Periodicals," 111, 119.
11. Mindy J. Morgan, "Reading Indigeneity in Indians at Work, 1933-39," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 13, no. 1 (2026): 32-62; Brian Hosmer, "The Wyoming Indian: Discourses on Labor and Politics in New Deal Reservation Publications," current issue.
12. Jeanette Henry Costo foreword in Murphy and Murphy, x-xi; Littlefield and Parins, "Native American Press," 622, 624.
13. *Ibid.*, x; Littlefield and Parins, "Native American Press," 619, 620, 622.
14. Costo foreword in Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, xiv.

15. Seonghoon Kim, “‘We Have Always Had These Many Voices’: Red Power Newspapers and a Community of Poetic Resistance,” *American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2015): 271-301, 271.
16. Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, ix, xx.
17. Scheiding and Newton, “Native American Periodicals,” 112.
18. Stanciu, Scheiding, and Doerfler, “‘You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire,’” 96.
19. Jennifer R. O’Neil, “‘It’s Up to Us’: The Rise of the *Wassaja* Newspaper as a Signal for Native American Self-Determination,” current issue. Some of the early issues of Carlos Montezuma’s original *Wassaja* (1916-22) have been digitized and are freely accessible. “*Wassaja*: freedom’s signal for the Indians,” Newberry Library, <https://collections.newberry.org/archive/-2KXJ8ZSQGBQS.html>; “*Wassaja*,” University of Arizona Libraries, Special Collections, <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/623267>. “Carlos Montezuma’s *Wassaja* Newsletter,” Arizona State University Library, <https://tinyurl.com/3hux5jfa>, accessed June 22, 2026.
20. For a study of Red Power periodicals, see Kim, “‘We Have Always Had These Many Voices.’”
21. Costo foreword in Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, ix-xi; Littlefield and Parins, “Native American Press,” 624.
22. Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, xix, 90, 154, 155; Littlefield and Parins, “Native American Press.”
23. James Ring Adams, “The Shield of Credibility: The Tribal Press in Defense of Sovereignty,” current issue. *Indian Country Today*, <https://ictnews.org/>, accessed June 2026.
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27. Costo foreword in Murphy and Murphy, *Let My People Know*, vii.
28. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.
29. See William Bauer, Dmitri Brown, Keith L. Camacho, Elizabeth Ellis, Katrina M. Phillips, and Joshua L. Reid, “Methodologies in Indigenous History,” *The American Historical Review* 130, no. 4 (2025): 1587-1614.
30. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). Also see Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) and Stanciu, Scheiding, and Doerfler, “‘You Could Speak the Truth with a Tongue of Fire,’” 99.
31. Victoria Bazin, Sue Currell, and E. James West, “Reading the Radical American Periodical,” *Radical Americas* 3, no. 1 (2018): 1-5, 1.
32. “Periodicals and Indigenous Modernity: Building a Text Corpus of American Indian Magazines, 1890-1930,” Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) project description and report, <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/441689155/ergebnisse>, accessed June 7, 2026.
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37. Amanda Johnson, “*Indian Center News*: Native American Women in Seattle Print Culture, 1960-1971,” current issue.
38. Sasha Maria Suarez, “Contesting ‘the so-called Indian experts’: Reading Indigenous Resistance to Settler Depictions in post-World War II Minneapolis Newspapers,” current issue.

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40. Gyorgy Toth, "The *Akwesasne Notes*: A Catalyst of Cold War Native American Transnational Protest," current issue.
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AUTHORS

GYÖRGY TOTH

György Tóth holds degrees from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary, and the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, USA. In his academic specializations, György combines U.S. cultural and social history with Transnational American Studies, Performance Studies, and archival scholarship to yield interdisciplinary insights into the politics of social and cultural movements in the U.S. and post-1945 Europe. Since 2014, György has served as Lecturer in post-1945 U.S. History and Transatlantic Relations at the University of Stirling, Scotland in the United Kingdom. His book *From Wounded Knee to Checkpoint Charlie*, on the transatlantic alliance for American Indian sovereignty in the Late Cold War, was published by SUNY Press in 2016. He is co-editor of the 2020 *Comparative American Studies* special issue “Red Power at 50: Re-Evaluations and Memory,” and author of “Richard Erdoes, Red Power’s Ally” in the volume *Familiar Strangers*, published with the Central European University Press – Amsterdam University Press in 2025.

BRIAN HOSMER

Brian Hosmer is Professor Emeritus at the History Department at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA. Before retiring from academia in 2025, he held the H.G. Barnard Chair in Western American History at the University of Tulsa, following academic positions at the University of Delaware, University of Wyoming, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Notably, he directed the Newberry Library’s prestigious D’Arcy McNickle Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies for six years. His research pivots around intersections between economic change and Indigenous nationhood in the 20th century. His books include *American Indians and the Marketplace*, *Native Pathways*, *Tribal Worlds*, *Native Americans and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, and *Indians of Illinois*. Most recently, he has published on topics like reservation newsletters published during the 1930s, “Community-Engaged Scholarship” in Indian country, and a study of Miami Nationhood based on papers held in the Gilcrease Museum archives.