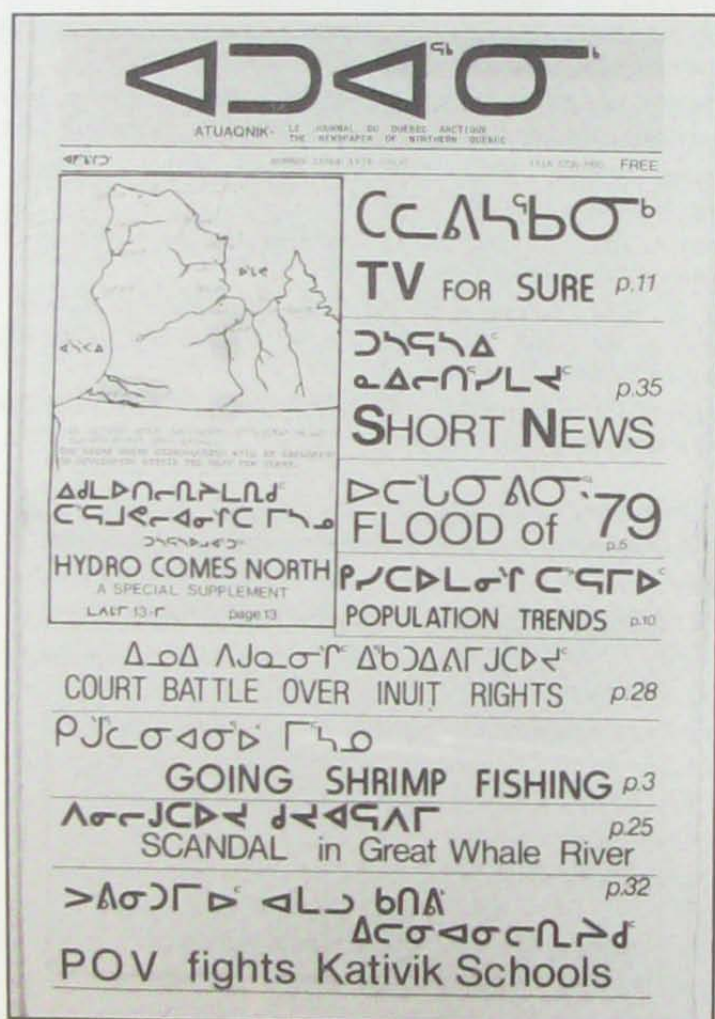


Atuaqnik: The Duration and Demise of a Native Newspaper

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Community newspapers and magazines have proliferated in the north ever since the founding of the first Canadian Inuit language newsletter, *Aglait Illunainortut*, in Nain, Labrador, late in the last century. Some of these publications survived only long enough to produce a few issues,



while others lasted for many years. Few of the earliest northern newspapers can be found in archives today, partly because paper was scarce in the Arctic until the 1940s and was greatly in demand for use in hand-made cartridges. Since the 1950s, however, the number of newspapers and magazines being produced by and for Native people has increased at a tremendous rate and librarians are more aware of the importance of these often amateurish-looking periodicals. It is now possible to use Inuit community newspapers to construct what librarian Hugh McNaught calls "cultural snapshots" of settlement life.

These community newspapers, which are often sponsored by church, government or other special interest groups, carry memoirs, poems, announcements of community meetings and letters about local and national concerns, as well as factual reports of current events. English is usually the language of publication, but in the north one of the Inuktitut dialects is frequently used as well. While Nain's *Aglait Illunainortut* ceased publication in 1903, that community has since been served by *Naimuik*, *Nainaviok* and *Kinatuinamot Illengajuk*, as well as newspapers such as the *Labradorian*, the newsletter *Moravian* and the cultural magazine *Them Days*, which includes some Native language material. Rankin Inlet in the Hudson Bay has had the *Rankin Inlet News* and the *Rankin Times*; Kuujuaq has had the *Northern Star*, *Taqralik* and *Atuatnik*; Baker Lake has had three papers; Pangirtung has also had three; and communities such as Holman Island, Sachs Harbour, Aklavik, Lake Harbour, and Cambridge Bay have all had at least one or two. In fact, a complete list of publications by and for Canadian Inuit would run to about two hundred titles.

Beyond the fact that there have been so many Inuit periodicals over the years is the question of *why* there have been so many. If there is a need for print material in Inuktitut and English specifically for northern residents, and there is a desire on the part of many individuals to supply that need, why have more of these publications not lasted longer? Why has Igloolik had four short-lived newsletters and cultural magazines instead of one long-lasting periodical? Part of the answer is that these publications are often spearheaded by a teacher, priest or community worker, and the paper folds when he or she is transferred, willingly or otherwise, out of the community. Funding is, of course, always a problem, too, but that is the case for virtually any small publication anywhere. In contrast to most Inuit newspapers, Baker Lake's *Tusagaksat* has published more or less regularly since 1960 under the editorship of the Reverend Armand Tagoona, an Inuk and permanent resident of the north.

It is generally recognized that, if Native issues are to be adequately reported to both the Native and non-Native communities, then this will

have to be done at least in part by Native journalists. A number of journalism and communications programs have emerged in recent years dedicated to training Inuit and Indians to take jobs with newspapers and with radio and television stations, particularly those which serve the Native community. These programs, such as the now defunct Program in Journalism for Native People at the University of Western Ontario, have had some success, but they have also experienced difficulties that are inherent in Native communications today. This paper looks at some of these problems as they became evident during the duration and demise of *Atuaqnik*; an independent, bilingual newspaper published in Northern Quebec between January 1979 and July 1980. *Atuaqnik* was a successful paper and its inevitable end serves as an object lesson for future Native journals, journalists and journalism schools.

Atuaqnik was recognized as an experiment right from the start. Staff of the Northern Quebec Inuit Association's monthly magazine, *Taqralik*, while happy with what they were doing on the magazine, felt the limitations of their affiliation and argued that an independent publication would be in a better position to report effectively and objectively to the people of northern Quebec on political issues. At the same meeting the Makivik Corporation was formed, the board of directors of NQIA agreed to provide temporary funding for such a paper. The initial idea was that *Taqralik* would continue as a quarterly magazine and include material such as legends and human interest stories, while *Atuaqnik*, the independent newspaper, would appear bi-weekly and would cover current news and issues while looking for outside funding. It quickly became evident that such a scheme was too ambitious; in nineteen months a total of thirteen issues of *Atuaqnik* appeared and the magazine *Taqralik* ceased publication entirely.

The experiment was not altogether a failure, however. The newspaper was well received and widely read in the communities it served, and Inuit reported that it acted as a useful tool in negotiations with the government concerning implementation of the James Bay and northern Quebec agreement. As an independent paper, *Atuaqnik* solicited and received written contributions from people who had been reluctant to become involved with *Taqralik*. As well as stories by its four core staff, it published letters and editorials by twenty-eight Inuit who were not formally associated with the newspaper, and included a column by Zebedee Nungak and articles by Charlie Patsauq and others. The paper was generally regarded as informative, it had a professional appearance and a pleasing format, and it covered a wide variety of political and cultural subjects in a competent and occasionally controversial manner.

A quick survey of the content of the newspaper shows that, as

intended, *Atuaqnik* was far more political in its orientation than its sister publication *Taqralik*, and more political than most other Inuit newsletters, magazines and papers. There were six articles on music and two on theatre (several of which related to visitors from Greenland), there were no legends, memoirs or articles on Inuit art, and there were only three articles on the co-operatives that play such a large part in controlling the Inuit art industry. Language, which in northern Quebec is as much a political issue as a cultural one, was the focus of twelve articles. The idea that hunting and trapping is a cultural or "lifestyle" issue in the north these days is perhaps reflected by the fact that there were only ten articles and letters about hunting and five about wildlife, while there were a total of twenty-nine on construction, commercial fisheries, mining and hydroelectric development. *Atuaqnik* also published twenty articles on land claims, twenty-seven on transportation, twenty-eight on communications and no less than twenty-two on specific Inuit political organizations. The balance of the articles was on education, health and justice. Education articles tended to focus on control of funding for regional schools; health concerns included the effects of pollution and mercury contamination; and justice issues looked at land claims cases and the development of a Native police force.

The primary problem in continuing to publish the newspaper, as identified by the newspaper's staff in an article titled "Special Report to the People and Organizations of Northern Quebec on *Atuaqnik*" (June/July 1980), was that there was no pool of new journalists to make the usual turnover of staff possible. They wrote: "Most of *Atuaqnik* staff wants to quit the newspaper and go on to something else, and there is no group that is immediately available to replace us to keep the paper going" (p. 15). There was also a number of secondary facts: funding required massive amounts of administrative work, and invoicing and advertising also had to be handled by the journalists. In combination, these factors meant that if any of the staff resigned, or even if all the staff took their vacations during the summer months, the newspaper would become inoperable. Prospective commitments to government training programs demanded an immediate solution to these long-term problems, and rather than enter into a program that they could not be sure of carrying out, the staff voted to close the newspaper.

The problem of finding staff for a Native newspaper in the north is a serious issue that may not have a solution. As the *Atuaqnik* journalists pointed out, housing shortages made it almost impossible to hire people from outside Kuujjuaq, the community from which the paper operated. Of the people living in Kuujjuaq who had the basic English/Inuktitut writing skills, few had a burning interest in journalism combined with an

interest in education, health care, natural resource development, linguistics, advances in communication, politics and so on. Fewer still were willing to develop the necessary mastery of typing, translation, layout, photography and administration. *Atuaqnik* staff concluded that "the well qualified Inuit that are needed at the paper are usually employed by one of the larger organizations that can provide proper staff housing and a much higher salary than *Atuaqnik* possibly could" (p. 17).

The staff consisted of the editor, Alec C. Gordon, Ungava reporter Willie Adams, general reporter William Tagoona and assistant editor Michael McGoldrick. While their formal qualifications were never publicized, profiles of the reporters made it clear that they were not novices. All had considerable previous experience and, one would assume, on-the-job training. The editor had been a television specialist with the Northern Quebec Inuit Association and had been the editor of *Taqralik* magazine for three years. The assistant editor, a non-Inuk, had worked in journalism and radio in the south before going north as an information officer with the NQIA. The general reporter had worked for a government publication in Yellowknife, had contributed material to magazines such as *Inuktitut* and *Inuit Today*, and was the first editor of *Taqralik*. The Ungava Coast reporter had some television and radio experience and had joined *Taqralik* three years before *Atuaqnik* started up.

Gordon, McGoldrick, Tagoona and Adams were operating under difficult conditions but they learned quickly, made adjustments without compromising standards in an unacceptable way, and generally felt optimistic about the operation. After more than a year, the publication was still plagued by administrative overload and staff was frequently unable to meet deadlines, but they managed to hire some outside help for typing and translation. It took eighteen months for the realization to sink in that, while other organizations and individuals were prepared to support *Atuaqnik*, it did not have the dedication of the original group. Burnout set in. As Alec Gordon wrote in "The Rise and Fall of *Atuaqnik*" in the tenth anniversary issue of the revived *Taqralik* (May 1984), "The staff of *Atuaqnik* hadn't committed themselves to work on the newspaper forever and some of them wanted to move onto other jobs" (p. 65).

The question that must be asked is, if there had been a larger pool of Native journalists to draw on, and if there had been secure funding available to release these journalists from the interminable burden of administrative paperwork, could *Atuaqnik* have succeeded? In considering the answer to that question, it is necessary to look first at several problematic issues that were *not* dealt with in the post-mortem conducted by *Atuaqnik* staff.

First, most northerners feel that a Native newspaper should be a bilingual newspaper; in the case of *Atuaqnik*, this meant an English and Inuktitut newspaper. *Atuaqnik* was specifically a regional publication, so the problem of dialect was reduced but not eliminated. Alec C. Gordon and Willie Adams both came from the Kuujuaq area and spoke the same dialect as their readers, but William Tagoona came from Baker Lake and readers were often unable to understand what he had written. People were highly supportive of Tagoona and encouraged him to continue writing but realistically there is little point in publishing material that cannot be understood. Michael McGoldrick spoke no Inuktitut at all so his material had to be translated. The cost of translating and publishing in two languages, in man hours as well as money, increased staffing problems enormously.

In truth, many Inuktitut publications are bilingual in name only because the Inuktitut is so poor that even fluent Native speakers choose to read the English instead. Any attack made on the use of Native language or syllabic orthography, particularly if it comes from a non-speaker, is likely to arouse anger rather than agreement because in an ideal world Native languages would be given equal status to English. However, in terms of training and funding, bilingual English/Inuktitut publications are usually compared to bilingual English/French publications, which is unrealistic. Furthermore, those doing the funding or the training are often not in a position to realize how inadequate that funding and training are because they do not speak Inuktitut and cannot assess how competent the work being produced is or how difficult the problems of translation are.

Another serious issue, that of Native contribution or content, was also not examined and could well have been related to the difficulties of translating highly technical or political material. Michael McGoldrick, a Montrealer, was given responsibility for covering stories originating in the south but affecting the north. This would seem like quite a logical decision given that he did not speak Inuktitut, but since most government and economic stories originate in Ottawa, Quebec or Toronto rather than in Kuujuaq or the Ungava coast, most of the very weighty topics fell under this heading. The Quebec referendum, health and environmental issues, Quebec Hydro development and the constitution were covered by the non-Inuit, while sports and recreation, music and theatre, liquor control, human interest stories, regional government and issues related to hunting and trapping were handled by Inuit reporters. The Baker Lake court action on land use was the only major topic consistently covered by an Inuk.

The Native journalists also tended to write far shorter articles than the

non-Native journalist, possibly because their heritage stresses oral communication rather than writing. Of the four staff writers at *Atuaqnik*, the one non-Native appeared to produce more and longer articles than the three Inuit. One Inuk journalist had signed as many articles as the non-Native, while the other two signed approximately 40 percent fewer. Of the first ten articles signed by each journalist, the pieces by the three Inuit were on average 40 percent shorter than those by the non-Native. Possibly the Native journalists were contributing more unsigned material or were so busy translating for the non-Native that their own work was curtailed. Perhaps they felt that shorter pieces were more appropriate for their readers or for the subjects they had to cover. Whatever the case, the newspaper appeared to publish an inordinately large proportion of material originating with the one non-Inuit staff member.

Ironically, the Inuit readership of *Atuaqnik* seems to have been more verbose than the staff. Of the letters to the editor, more than 35 percent were written by non-Inuit, a large proportion considering that the paper was delivered free to households in northern Quebec but went south only to paid subscribers. Inuit readers, however, wrote letters that were on average 35 percent longer than those by non-Inuit. Inuit letter writers also tended to tackle fairly complex and difficult issues such as linguistics, hydroelectric development and unemployment, while non-Inuit wrote simple letters of support and congratulations to the paper, or thank-you's for hospitality extended to them in the north. The fact that the Inuit readership responded so strongly to the more complex news items indicates that perhaps these subjects should have been covered by the Inuit journalists.

The problems faced by Native journalists today are massive compared to those of thirty years ago. When Mary Panegoosho founded *Inuktitut* magazine in 1959, she hand-wrote the syllabic captions on the photographs and produced an issue whenever her other work was not too pressing. Armand Tagoona single-handedly wrote, printed and distributed *Tusagaksat* for a dozen years while also contributing to other publications. Mark Kalluak wrote most, and edited all, of not only *Messenger* but the *Keewatin Echo* as well. Such a work-load would be considered impossible to complete today.

One of the difficulties that hampers Native journalists now is that they must not only be highly capable writers in two languages but they must be highly skilled technicians as well. Where a typewriter, a mimeograph machine and a Brownie were adequate resources for someone putting out a community newspaper twenty or thirty years ago, students of journalism today have to learn word-processing and computer-aided layout; and they are expected to produce fairly sophisticated images, both graphic and

photographic, to accompany their work. In addition, they may have strong English skills but they rarely have the skills in their Native language that the earlier journalists had.

The problems that caused *Atuaqnik* to fold have still not been solved. There are too few trained Inuit journalists; there is a terrible shortage of housing in the north; funding for Native communications societies is inadequate and had recently suffered further cuts; and young adults are not as fluent in Inuktitut as their elders. News coverage is still needed, though, and at least some of it must be done by Native people. The courage, ingenuity and determination shown by Gordon, Tagoona, Adams and McGoldrick in trying to establish an independent regional newspaper should be encouraged and harnessed. Should such an attempt be made again, several points might be kept in mind.

First, Native journalism programs should be encouraged and supported by Native organizations. Government will not continue funding academic programs, such as the one at Western, if the Native community does not agree that its aims are not in conflict and it is not in competition with Native communications societies. Native communities want trained, professional people running their news outlets, and established journalism schools prepared to accommodate Native students' special needs should be supported.

Secondly, if non-Natives must be hired by bilingual Native newspapers, perhaps their roles should be limited to form, not content. They might edit the English produced by Native staff and aid in administration and production, but Native journalists should be writing original material, not translating or doing syllabic typing for non-Native staff. Non-Inuit who do not speak Inuktitut could be hired as technicians rather than as journalists. Lengthy, in-depth articles full of technical detail that cannot be accurately translated or easily understood by the readership should be sacrificed, for the time being, in favour of shorter articles originating with Inuit writers.

Third, production should be simplified as much as possible. A glossy, professional-looking publication in which the Inuktitut is unreadable because of poor editing or translating is not preferable to a clearly written newspaper with a crude appearance and less than perfect photographs. If this means going back to the typewriter and mimeograph machines, and spending the money on more help with editing and training, so be it. At least the material will be readable.

Finally, Native communications societies must work co-operatively. If there are too few journalists available and there is not enough money to go around, the equivalent of a Native wire service could lower costs and improve the content of regional papers. At the moment there are newspapers coming out of a number of different northern settlements and

there are any number of newsletters and magazines produced by political, cultural and religious groups. Nobody reads them all, but the best of each might be contributed by all the disparate groups to make available one or two northern or circumpolar publications.

Many people believe that regional magazines and newspapers have, by definition, a limited lifespan and should not be allowed to go on and on producing after the initial energy runs out. Perhaps *Atuaqnik*, like many of the two hundred of so other Inuit-oriented newspapers, magazines and newsletters, lasted as long as it needed to. Everyone connected with *Atuaqnik*—journalists, readers and scholars alike—learned something from the experiment, and Alec C. Gordon, Willie Adams, Michael McGoldrick, William Tagoona, Zebedee Nungak, Charlie Patsauq, Thamassie Tulugak, Thomassie Qumak, Aibilie Nowra, Isa Smiler and the two dozen other Inuit who put their thoughts on paper made a major contribution to Native journalism in Canada. If *Atuaqnik* was a failure, it was a glorious failure that taught us a great deal about how to make sure the next independent Native newspaper is a success.