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THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED transcript of an interview with Alex Jacobs, co-editor of Akwesasne Notes (based in Rooseveltown, New York), the longest running Native Journal in North America.

DON ALEXANDER: I'd be interested in your views on technology and whether you think it can be used to the benefit of Native people.

ALEX JACOBS: There's a relationship between high technology and low technology. It's not just a one-way street. There's a situation out in the southwest where Hopi seeds, which are thousands of years old, are being studied for possible use in drought-stricken Africa. Here's a case of low technology people coming to the rescue of high technology people when all the high technology stuff has failed. This assimilation and acculturation thing works both ways. Low technology people adapt. Native people are using high technology to survive, using it in the service of low technology, but at the same time Indian culture is beginning to be seen as having something to say to people who are suffering from overdevelopment.

AICOM [Associated Indigenous Communications] has introduced a computer system for keeping people in touch with one another, and there's the possibility of a new satellite system. All this is going to happen in Indian country, but the face-to-face meetings have to continue too. The computers are going to save lives. When something happens, it's going to be instantaneous. In the old days, when something happened out in the middle of nowhere between whoever was fighting - some Indians and a government or a corporation - it took days to get it out and days for people to respond. But, with the computer networks, it will mean a hell of a lot in terms of response time, saving lives, saving nations. When it comes down to it, a band of three hundred people - if they're surprised in the middle of the night - their whole community could be gone like that.

DON: Or on a bigger scale what's happening down at Big Mountain, Arizona (where the U.S. government is involved in the attempted forced relocation of thousands of indigenous people).

ALEX: The last time I felt what I'm sure people feel with Big Mountain - like what more can be done? - was just before Wounded Knee. And then Wounded Knee hit and people were killed, it was a bad time, and the repression was severe. But it really galvanized things, it got the movement going. So Big Mountain is going to do the same thing. They're going to back Reagan down. It's got to happen. Reagan says the fence is going to be put up, and the Navajos and Hopis say it's not going to happen.

DON: How has Akwesasne Notes managed for seventeen years? You put out a thirty-two page tabloid six times a year, with writers on staff and costs of printing and typesetting. How do you do it?

ALEX: It's impossible! We're low technology people, apparently not interested in money. That's why we're still here. And we're still broke, and we have to send out our appeal letters every year. Our subscriptions only account for sixty to seventy percent of our costs, so we've got quite a bit to make up. And then there's the burnout phase that any organization or movement goes through. There's a staff of about a dozen. We put out three publications. Everybody's paid the same subsistence wage. And any other side projects, anyone who has to have other jobs to survive, we just work around it. We used to work for twenty bucks a week and all the potatoes you could dig up. Nowadays, that twenty bucks just doesn't go very far. Now, we get one hundred and fifty bucks a week - that's basic economics.

We used to put out 100,000 copies every time, and back then it was almost monthly - that was over a million copies, and most of them were going out free! Around 1980, there was a business decision made that it couldn't continue the way it was - on a donation basis - so we switched to subscription. So, now it costs to participate and it's dropped from 100,000 to 10,000, and a lot of people think we're not around anymore. Ever since Reagan was elected in 1980, this whole...
mood has taken over. But there’s a hell of a lot of people still working and putting out, and Notes is in there too. We don’t put out those extra copies, so we don’t exist — in certain circles! We have to double our subscriptions to be in a position where we don’t have to worry about things. Everybody is obviously not doing it for the money. We do it because it has to be put out, it has to be done.

DON: What do you see as being the purpose of Akwesasne Notes?
ALEX: It gets into advocacy journalism. I guess Notes and a lot of movement papers never had respect because we don’t have journalistic credentials. We’re not going to give the corporations equal time. We have thirty-two pages, and we’re not going to give anybody like that equal time. They have their lawyers, they have millions of dollars, they have publications, they own all the broadcasting companies, so what the hell! And we’re not going to give governments equal time. And we’re not going to give religions equal time.

And the same thing we’ll say with the Sandinistas, on the other side of the coin. They’re in a fight with the Miskitos, and the left and the Sandinistas they have their organs and their support. And we try as much as possible to be balanced on that particular situation. But we do get some flak on that issue. But where the hell are the Miskitos going to get to get their point of view across? It’s touchy. I sure as hell wouldn’t trust the U.S. in that situation, but with the Sandinistas, there’s got to be some changes. There’s thirty million Indian people south of Rio Grande, and it’s all in the Sandinistas’ hands. Our job is to make those contacts, and get that news out there.

DON: What do you feel the problem is in Nicaragua?
ALEX: The Indians, they don’t understand what happens. They have their own cooperatives, but they’re not called cooperatives. It’s just the way things are done. So the government comes in and says you’re not going to do it that way cooperatively, you’re going to do it this way. This is called a cooperative. Every incident is like this. It’s just racism in the Americas, from the North to the South. It doesn’t matter whether it’s English or French or Spanish. It’s still racism when it comes down to Indian people or folk people or low technology people.

DON: By contrast, it seems that there are a lot of sympathetic movements coming to the fore in recent years.
ALEX: The Green movement, the bioregional movement, the permaculture people, Indian philosophy — they’re all akin, it’s all together, and when you start putting those figures together, we’re talking about millions of people. These movements have the potential to change the face of the planet.

Don Alexander

For information or subscription inquiries about Akwesasne Notes, write to A.N., P.O. Box 196, Mohawk Nation, Rooseveltown, New York, USA 13683-0196.