The long journey to publish Nunatsiaq News

A personal recollection – part 2

Michael Roberts, Publisher

Nunatsiaq News was for sale in 1985. Monica Connolly, the owner and publisher, had decided to move from Iqaluit. We met her broker in Montreal and were served an elegant lunch of smoked char and a glass of Chardonnay. We shook hands on a deal.

We then dealt with Nunasi Corporation, which would become 51 per cent owner. The board resolved to never interfere with editorial decisions. We published a full-page ad committing to that decision.

I flew to Iqaluit to find that the operation was quite a bit less elegant than lunch.

Nunatsiaq News was housed in an old "matchbox" house, 512 square feet. Half the office was filled with a Gestetner printer, which emitted foul fumes of ink and oil. A space heater added to the atmosphere. The air was blue with cigarette smoke. In the corner, the toilet was a honey bucket closed off with a shower curtain.

I met Jim Bell and Bill McConkey. Both would work for the paper for nearly four decades. I mapped out my vision for the future. They weren't impressed. Many years later, I learned that they named the new owners after Star Wars characters. My name was Luke Skywalker, after my grandiose ideas. When we finally got a phone system, Bill would transfer my calls to Jim with, "Luke on line one."

The local Iqaluit newspaper printed 800 copies each week with typewritten English and handwritten syllabics on legal-sized paper.

Financed by a grant and loans, we moved typesetting equipment to Iqaluit and housed it in a trailer, with extension cords from our office shack. That was fine until spring, when the melted snow on the roof flooded the trailer and equipment.

We converted the paper to a tabloid with typeset English and Inuktitut, and started printing on newsprint in the south. First Air started flying and airfares, temporarily, dropped to $99 one way. Many was the time that airplanes were held on the tarmac waiting for the newspaper artwork.

We soon had our first financial crisis. The Tunngavik Federation walked away from land claims negotiations as the feds wouldn't negotiate a territory of Nunavut. Nunasi was backed by future land claims funds. They were instructed to divest all startups. We bought back their shares, laid off staff, and cut back plans.

This was by no means the last financial crisis. They followed a familiar pattern of expense cuts, loans from shareholders, and pledging personal assets to allow the company to survive. Publishing is not for the faint of heart.

We moved into expansive modern offices overlooking the bay in what was then called the Royal Bank building. We had a darkroom, equipment, phone lines, a fax machine and all the modern conveniences.

In 1988, my brother Steven and his wife, Roberta, moved to Iqaluit. He took on the role of publisher and supervised a staff which peaked at 17: editors, ad sales, reporters, translators, typesetters and production artists. He lived in Iqaluit for 14 years with his family.

Those years included numerous milestone events. Steven was a founder of the Baffin (now Nunavut) Trade Show, a member of the Iqaluit for Capital Committee, and publisher of special publications to mark the creation of Nunavut. Roberta did groundbreaking work in educational publishing.

We published Arctic Circle magazine, created the Nunavut Handbook, expanded our educational publishing across Canada, and formed Ayaya Communications & Marketing with Inuit shareholders in 2002.

In Ottawa, my youngest brother David married the late Vera Panaktak from Cambridge Bay. They had two boys, Jason and Chris, both of whom are Ayaya shareholders. Jason moved to Iqaluit after Ayaya was formed and worked there for 12 years. He moved back in 2023 with his family and is now managing director director of Ayaya.

Steven's son, Taylor Roberts, is now Nunatsiaq News' advertising sales manager. My daughter, Julia, works for the companies today and was named assistant publisher of Nunatsiaq News earlier this year.

Nunatsiaq News gradually expanded its circulation and editorial coverage, first to the other Baffin communities, then to the Kivalliq and Kitikmeot regions, and finally to Nunavik.

Our journalism improved, mostly under Jim Bell, but also under a succession of other editors including Kelly Curwin, Matthew Spence, Todd Phillips and Greg Coleman. In more recent years, until his death in 2021, Jim worked as a contributing editor with Lisa Gregoire, Patricia Lightfoot and Corey Larocque.

We have had many stellar reporters, such as Sarah Rogers, Jane George and many others. Dozens of young journalists have made their mark at Nunatsiaq News. They are often poached by government, lured by higher salaries and pensions. At one point, I wanted to post a "CBC Human Resources Dept." sign outside our office.

We've played a strong role in publishing Inuktitut, with many talented translators and Inuktitut experts, like long-term translator Basil Kiblakoot, and Inuktitut editors Rebecca Awa, Itee Akavak, and Clara Kolit.

And we've had amazing columnists, like John Amagoalik (My Little Corner of Canada), Kenn Harper (Taissumani), and Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley. And of course, the first Inuk cartoonist Alootook Ipellie, and Ayla Kreelak following in his steps today.

Jim learned HTML — a machine language that runs websites — on his own and launched our first website in 1993. Today, it's an award-winning website filled with outstanding journalism that routinely cleans up at awards ceremonies. Between two and three million people visit our website each year.

Over the years, the community gradually got used to our role. With no official Opposition, we stated opposing views. We held leaders responsible. Ministers and leaders have resigned. We've had requests to airlift reporters out of town due to threats of physical violence. Legal letters were routine. I've had government ministers call me to threaten financial ruin.

But over the years I believe most, except the most regressive, understand that journalism is a foundation of democracy and good government. Even in Nunavut. Even in Nunavik.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we stopped printing. The rollout of decent internet across the North means we can deliver the news instantly. The appetite for week-old news on paper, given the time it takes for production, printing and air freight, is disappearing.

We resumed publishing a print edition in March.

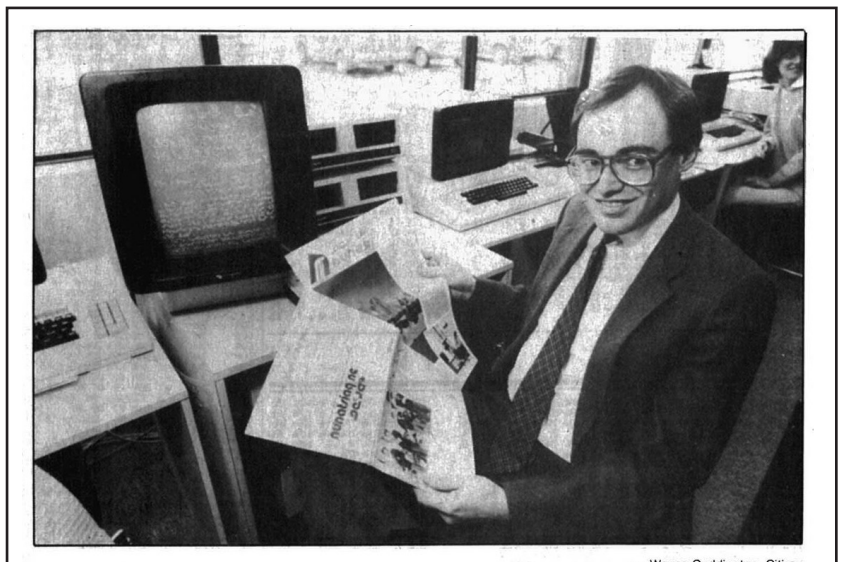
What will the future bring? Facebook and Google are luring advertising dollars away from community newspapers. The other northern newspapers, facing failure, have been absorbed by newspaper chains. Independent newspapers are disappearing across Canada.

I have to be optimistic. We have published for 50 years — a remarkable milestone.

Nunavut and Nunavik can't afford to be without Nunatsiaq News. With support from the community, perhaps we'll see another 50 years.

This is the second of a two-part story about the history of Nunatsiaq News, which is marking its 50th anniversary in 2023.

Michael Roberts is the publisher of Nunatsiaq News.



—Wayne Cuddington, Citizen

Michael Roberts: color photos and computerized typesetting will change weekly

Inuit newspaper to get a new look

By Karen Benzing
Citizen staff writer

An Ottawa-based typesetting and graphics firm specializing in native language publications has joined forces with an Inuit-owned company to publish a slick weekly newspaper in the Eastern Arctic.

Nortext Information Design Ltd., formed in 1978, and Nunasi Corp., the Ottawa-based Inuit development company for the Central and Eastern Arctic, have purchased the *Nunatsiaq News*, a bilingual community paper printed in English and Inuktituk, the Inuit language. The newspaper is based in Frobisher Bay.

The two firms have formed Nunatext Publishing Corp., a joint-venture company with Nunasi owning 51 per cent and Nortext 49 per cent.

Nunatext will be based in Frobisher Bay.

Michael Roberts, president of Nortext and Nunatext, said Friday that with a new look, color pictures and computerized typesetting equipment capable of producing Inuktituk characters, "we hope to turn *Nunatsiaq News* into the major publication in the Northwest Territories."

Roberts expects to double the newspaper's circulation of 2,500 in the first year.

Nunatext also plans to open a publishing division in Frobisher Bay next year to produce books and other publications in the Arctic.

Roberts said the newspaper, new typesetting and design equipment and other start-up costs total about $400,000. He said the federal Department of Regional Industrial Expansion provided a grant of $160,000; the rest of the money was raised through debt and equity financing.

He estimated the proposed publishing division will cost about $500,000 to set up. Overall, about 50 Inuit are expected to be employed.

Nunasi decided on the joint venture after looking into the possibility of setting up publishing operations in the Eastern Arctic. Previously Eastern Arctic communities had to pay firms in Yellowknife and in southern Canada to produce Inuktituk publications. Earl Laliberte, projects director of Nunasi, said the firm hooked up with Nortext because "it is one of only a few companies that has any experience in Inuit publications, has a good industrial base and excellent management."

Although Nunatext will eventually take business away from Nortext, Roberts said the demand for Inuktituk publications and the firm's conventional business in the Ottawa area has grown steadily. He expects Nortext gross revenues to reach $1.2 million by the 1986 fiscal yearend June 30. That's up from $900,000 for the previous year.

Nunatext's purchase of Nunatsiaq News got lots of coverage in other media, such as this 1985 article in the Ottawa Citizen. (Image courtesy of Michael Roberts) Nunatext-ᑯᑦ ᓂᐅᕕᖏᓐᓄᓂ ᔥᓇᕆᔨᐊᖅ ᑐᓴᒃᖏᓪᓗᓇᐃᒃᑯᓂ ᑐᓴᒃᖏᓪᓗᐊᖏᖁᔭᐅᓚᐅᖅᓴᖅ ᐊᔨᖏᕐᓂᓂ ᔨᐊᓕᓴᖅᑎᑎᕈᐅᔨᓂ, ᔨᑦᓴ ᐅᒥᖏᓗ 1985-Γ ᑎᑎᕋᖅᑕᐅᓂᐅᔨᒥ Ottawa Citizen-Γ. (ᐊᖏᔪᓕᐅᖅᑕᐅᔨᖅ ᒪᐃᑯᑦ ᖃᐅᑦᓯᒍᑦ)