

Making media together: Experiences of Aboriginal participation within co-creative remote media production teams

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Abstract

This article outlines the findings of a research project that examined how participation can be understood, and subsequently improved, within collaborative, co-creative media practices. As a case study, the research project looked at Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media and Communications (PAW Media), a remote Indigenous media organisation (RIMO) based in Yuendumu in Australia's Northern Territory. By means of 13 in-depth interviews, grounded in participant observation, the project examined how Aboriginal participation was motivated, enabled and limited from the perspectives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborators. The study revealed practices of Aboriginal participation at PAW Media that were highly valued by participants; nonetheless, limits to participation were noted and two conflicting views regarding improved practice expressed. Non-Aboriginal facilitators supported a transition towards greater Aboriginal autonomy over production, involving a handover of tasks and responsibility to their local Aboriginal counterparts; however, most Aboriginal media producers indicated that their participation was currently better served within a refined version of the existing co-creative structure.

Keywords

Aboriginal producers, co-creative, cross-cultural, Indigenous media, participation, production, remote, teams, Warlpiri, Yuendumu

Introduction

It is another hot summer afternoon in the remote Central Australian community of Yuendumu, 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. Inside one of the studios at the local Indigenous media organisation, a few young men sit together making props for an upcoming film project. They discuss the footy, laugh about YouTube clips they have seen and share ideas for the film's storyline. Their conversation drifts between English and the local language, Warlpiri. Two of the media workers are Aboriginal, from the local community, and the other is a 'whitefella' facilitator. In neighbouring rooms, other small, cross-cultural teams work together to produce local video, radio and music projects. The organisation for which they work is called Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media and Communications, or PAW Media. It is one of eight remote Indigenous media organisations (RIMOs) in Australia.

The production model at PAW Media can be described as an example of 'co-creative media', involving collaborative relationships between professional producer/facilitators and community media workers to produce storytelling projects (Rennie, 2013: 21). Co-creative media practices can be found in various forms across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, arts, disability and educational sectors in Australia (Woodrow et al., 2015: 150–1). Co-creative media gives people from marginalised and disadvantaged groups the opportunity to participate in media and storytelling

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production through collaboration with a facilitator. This key collaborative relationship between participant and facilitator, and the way participation is motivated, conceptualised, enabled and limited within it, is the focus of the research project discussed in this article.

As a case study through which to explore co-creative media, my research examines lived experiences of participation within cross-cultural, collaborative media production teams working at PAW Media. By focusing on a case study within the context of remote Indigenous media production, the research offers insights into a model of co-creative media that has been operating in various forms for more than 30 years. By means of 13 in-depth interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborators, grounded in participant observation, the study describes the current practices of participation at PAW Media. It also uncovers how an ideal form of participation in media is conceptualised, and documents recommendations to help reach that ideal. Through this process, I propose a framework for evaluating participation in co-creative media practices that can be applied both within and outside the remote Indigenous media sector.

To date, academic research into co-creative media has focused on theorising, mapping and describing the concept, and its position within the broader field of participatory media, storytelling and research (Spurgeon et al., 2009; Woodrow et al., 2015). Literature on co-creative media offers the key insight that participation in participatory media is often something that is actively facilitated, rather than an organic occurrence in response to a new technology (Rennie, 2013: 23). However – perhaps because it is a relatively new area of study – the literature is limited in its accounts of how participation is facilitated, experienced and limited, and the power dynamics at play within the central participant–facilitator relationship. For people in marginalised communities, including remote Aboriginal communities, the ability to participate in media can be empowering (IRCA, 2010: 6–7). Without first understanding how participation is conceptualised and experienced by those performing it, though, we are limited in our capacity to evaluate and improve co-creative media as a participatory practice.

Theoretical framework

Participation

Most scholarship positions participation within the context of Western democratic ideals (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2011; Pretty, 1995; White, 1996). Here, types of participation are assessed within two binaries. High participation features acts of maximal control, with individuals and communities being able to significantly influence the socio-political structures in which they exist, and thus hold those in power to account. Meanwhile, low participation features activities with negligible power redistribution. Participation is here differentiated from concepts such as interaction or access (Carpentier, 2012). With the community media sector increasingly needing to demonstrate its social impact, this maximalist view of participation is a valuable concept to incorporate within evaluative and analytical frameworks (Dreher, 2017: 14).

A notable and commonly cited academic model for evaluating participation is Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, details of which were first published in 1969. Eight categories are proposed, ranked as rungs on a ladder, ascending from least to most reflective of empowering participation (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Ascending from the bottom, the categories are: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control (1969: 217). Only the top three categories of citizen control, delegated power and partnership are described as being reflective of citizen power, while the remaining categories are classed as tokenism or non-participation (1969: 217).

There are some limitations to Arnstein's ladder and similar participation evaluation frameworks. They do not allow for the dynamic, non-linear and evolving nature of participation (Potter, 2014: 44). The models fail to shed light on who participates, and the activities in which

they participate (Cornwall, 2008: 275–6), or to consider the right not to participate (Potter, 2014: 44). Further, the Western democratic ideals underpinning the models may exclude other ways in which participation can be valued in alternate cultural and political contexts.

In attempting to find a way of thinking about participation that is useful within the non-Western setting of my research, I will try two approaches. First, in keeping with key literature on critical participation, I recognise participation as synonymous with power; however, given the non-Western setting of this research, it is possible – even likely – that Aboriginal study participants perceive participation in different terms than those valued in the models. Therefore, though I reference Arnstein's ladder in my research findings, I will also preference an evaluative approach that considers participation more subjectively. How it is understood and valued should be dependent on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants, as shaped by their political and cultural contexts. This approach to participation reflects Couldry's (2010) theorising on the notion of voice. Couldry points to the necessity of understanding voice in terms of how it is valued by subjects whose voices are, or are not, reflected in social, cultural and political institutions. In my research, only by first finding out how PAW Media's production staff experience and perceive Aboriginal participation have I been able to make context-specific recommendations to support that participation.

Participatory and co-creative media

The term 'participatory media' describes bottom-up, inclusive, process-driven approaches to media production, and represents an alternative to top-down, outcome-driven orthodox media structures (Spurgeon et al., 2009: 276). Participatory media allow people who would otherwise only be media consumers to also be media producers (Rennie, 2013: 23). Huesca (2008: 191) lists three components of participatory media production: (1) access to communication resources; (2) participation in key aspects of production; and (3) collective ownership and policy-making.

However, literature on participatory media often fails to critique the organisational and social structures enabling, shaping and potentially restricting participation (Spurgeon et al., 2009: 276). Participatory media frameworks can be too technologically determinist, assuming that practices spring up organically when new media technologies arrive (2009: 276). In reality, participation is often the result of planned and intentional processes involving professional facilitators and organisations (2009: 276).

Challenging the assumption that participation in media is always an organic, participant-led process, the term 'co-creative media' is used to describe a type of participatory media (Rennie, 2013: 23). The co-creative model assumes that many people interested in being involved with participatory media projects are unable or unwilling to take part in every aspect of production. Here, facilitators can fill in these gaps, allowing participants to participate in the capacity of their choosing (Spurgeon et al., 2009: 280). In this sense, a co-creative approach is a way of configuring participation in relation to the technical and industrial process of media production.

Ideally, co-creative media projects allow for the 'best of both worlds'. They bring people with unique perspectives and non-mainstream stories together with professional media producers and facilitators. However, the reality of negotiating the constantly evolving roles and power dynamics at play between the two parties can be complex. According to Rennie (2013: 24), drawing attention to the role of professional facilitators within participatory media should not undermine the authenticity of participation; rather, the co-creative model acknowledges that facilitated relationships often exist within the production process, and could have positive and/or negative effects on participation.

Background: PAW Media and its cross-cultural, co-creative workforce

PAW Media is a RIMO based in Yuendumu in Australia's Northern Territory. The organisation, formerly known as Warlpiri Media Association (WMA), emerged in the early 1980s. It has since grown to service 14 remote communities with radio and other media, and has a footprint stretching more than 450,000 square kilometres (PAW Media and Communications, 2016b).

One catalyst for the early development of WMA was the arrival of United States-born anthropologist Eric Michaels in the 1980s (Hinkson, 2002: 202). He came to Yuendumu after hearing local people had started using video cameras, a novel instance of remote Indigenous media production in Australia (Hinkson, 2002: 202). Michaels worked alongside local video producers such as Kumanjayi Japanangka Granites and Francis Jupurrurla Kelly to develop a 'Warlpiri approach to video' (PAW Media and Communications, 2016a: para. 2). Since Michaels' departure from Yuendumu in the late 1980s, a succession of non-Aboriginal managers have been employed (PAW Media and Communications, 2016a). From the late 1990s, non-Aboriginal employees have also worked in full-time video and radio facilitation and production roles (PAW Media and Communications, 2016a). Local media workers outnumber their non-Aboriginal counterparts, but tend to work casually or part-time. It is typical for local staff to be away for extended periods, but return to PAW Media weeks, months or even years later. At the time of my research, there were four non-Aboriginal producers and about 15 to 20 local Av producers working across radio, video, animation and music platforms.

Not all media produced by the organisation is a result of co-creative practice. Some projects – especially in the music department – are entirely locally organised and created; however, the majority of work produced at PAW Media is the product of some level of cross-cultural collaboration.

Method***Participants***

As mentioned above, I conducted interviews with 13 participants working in radio, video, music and/or animation production at PAW Media. Nine of the participants were Aboriginal, employed as local community media workers. Four of the participants were non-Aboriginal, employed as producers, trainers, facilitators and coordinators. The average (mean) age was 42 years for Aboriginal participants and 44 years for other participants. Aboriginal participants had been employed at PAW Media for an average of 4.6 years, while their non-Aboriginal counterparts had been employed there for an average of 2.5 years. First languages spoken by Aboriginal participants included Warlpiri, Anmatjere, Arrente and English. The first language of all non-Aboriginal participants was English.

Researcher role

Prior to conducting this research, I worked for PAW Media as a radio producer for almost three years between 2012 and 2014. During that period, I collaborated with local Aboriginal broadcasters to produce live and pre-recorded radio for the 14 communities on PAW Media's footprint. This job was my first experience working in a remote Aboriginal community, which was an immense privilege; however, I found it difficult to fully understand and justify my role, as a non-Aboriginal person, in facilitating Aboriginal media production. On a personal level, this research project represented an opportunity to better understand my facilitator role in relation to enabling and limiting Aboriginal participation. On a broader level, I hope this research can be developed into a useful resource for other facilitators and organisations supporting Aboriginal participation in remote community workplaces.

As a former employee, I consider myself as more an insider researcher than an outsider researcher (Gair, 2012: 137). This study benefited from advantages generally granted to insider researchers, including easier access to organisational gatekeepers; a pre-established rapport with participants; and an existing understanding of local context (Unluer, 2012). However, the study may have been disadvantaged if my established familiarity had censored the information participants chose to share, so as not to upset our existing relationships. I endeavoured to minimise this risk in the interviews by asking broad, non-leading questions. In data analysis, I remained alert to the possibility of participant self-censorship, and where I believed that it may have been a factor, I disclosed this doubt in the findings. In data collection and analysis, I acknowledge my reflexivity as a researcher.

Data collection

Research was conducted during two field trips. The first was to a Remote Indigenous Media Festival, hosted by PAW Media in the Warlpiri community of Lajamanu for one week in October 2015. The second field trip was a week-long visit to PAW Media's base in Yuendumu in April 2016.

Given that this was an exploratory study into Aboriginal participation, I selected an ethnographic approach as a way to base my findings in the perceptions of those experiencing and facilitating participation. Data was collected primarily through confidential, semi-structured, individual in-depth interviews. Participant observation was used as a secondary research tool. Data was collected via audio recording (with prior consent) and note-taking.

Considering that research conducted in remote Aboriginal communities is tainted by a history of exploitation and miscommunication, I prioritised ethical approaches to gaining free, prior informed consent from participants. As Meadows (2009: 124) recommends, I invested time into knowing, being known and gaining authorisation in the community I was researching. Also, following Laverick and Brown's advice (cited in Liamputtong, 2010: 5), I adopted an approach of patience, courtesy, adaptability and willingness to learn.

Data analysis

In a qualitative data analysis process, recordings of the 13 interviews were assigned numerical codes, transcribed and read repeatedly, along with participant observation notes. Recurring themes were identified and categorised.

Given the limited scope of this study, focus on recurrent themes was prioritised over exploration of each individual participant's view. Categories were included only if addressed by multiple participants, or if featuring an opinion contradicting a view held by multiple participants. This was an attempt to account for outlier perspectives while also allowing for discussion of the major issues emerging from the study.

Results

This study presents its results in five sections: (1) motivations for participation; (2) co-creative distribution of labour; (3) facilitator-participant power dynamics; (4) perceptions of ideal participation; and (5) recommendations to improve participation. In communicating these results, I prioritise use of participant quotes. This is an attempt to allow participants to speak for themselves, and to provide insights into the way participants perceive the issues explored. Participant observations are only noted where they contradict, or add an additional perspective to, what was found in participant interviews.

Henceforth, I adopt the Warlpiri words *Kardiya* (non-Aboriginal) and *Yapa* (Aboriginal) to refer to participants. This reflects how participants refer to themselves and their cross-cultural colleagues within the interview excerpts displayed. To respect anonymity, participants are

referred to as *Kardiya* participants 1 to 4 and *Yapa* participants 1 to 9. I elected not to allocate fake names, as this may cause confusion within such a small organisation and community.

Motivations for participation

Yapa participants revealed three key motivations to work at PAW Media. The first, and most commonly cited, was a sense that their work provided an important community service. *Yapa* participants spoke with pride about serving local audiences. *Yapa* participant 1 stated:

I love going to work every morning, love doing things for our community ... If we don't go to work, nothing gets done, we need to turn up for work every day.

Yapa participant 2 added:

I like mostly talking on the radio and talking to my people. Yeah, the good thing I like is when people call us for a request. I know then that the community is listening ... Providing a service for our people. It's really good.

A second motivator for *Yapa* media producers was enjoyment of the work atmosphere. *Yapa* participant 3 said:

People are happy, you come to work, your workmates greet you in the morning with 'Good morning, it's a beautiful day.' Sometimes I come just to hang around with the other workers.

Yapa participant 4 had noticed the work atmosphere at PAW Media from a young age, stating:

Ever since I was at school, I've seen a lot of people having fun here. I thought I might work for media because it's fun there.

A final factor motivating work participation for *Yapa* staff was enjoyment from the media production process. *Yapa* participant 5 said:

I like listening to music, using the computer, looking at old stuff, doing video shots, working the panels on the [radio] desk. You get to do recording and editing. I'm really interested in it.

For *Kardiya* staff facilitating the participatory media process, there were two common motivating factors. The first was the opportunity to learn about, and work within, a different culture. The second was the chance to support and empower local staff. *Kardiya* participant 1 summed this up:

Learning about the culture that we're working in is fantastic. Seeing engagement from *Yapa* is terrific. They're the two best things about it.

Co-creative distribution of labour

All study participants were asked to describe their own jobs as well as those of their cross-cultural, co-creative colleagues. PAW Media workers described a clear demarcation of tasks and responsibilities along cultural lines.

Both *Yapa* and *Kardiya* participants described the *Yapa* work as fitting into five key areas: (1) everyday media production (broadcasting/editing/recording); (2) generating or approving key creative ideas; (3) community liaison to organise media projects and ensure cultural protocols were met; (4) Aboriginal language-based tasks; and (5) providing cultural advice to *Kardiya* collaborators.

The *Kardiya* position within co-creative teams was attributed with more varied roles. These included: (1) technical media expertise; (2) training and helping *Yapa* staff; (3) coordinating large-scale projects such as feature documentaries; (4) day-to-day paperwork and administration; (5) tasks requiring written English literacy; (6) liaison with government and other organisations; (7)

writing and acquitting grants; (8) delegating and coordinating work for *Yapa* staff; (9) filling in for *Yapa* staff when they were away; (10) tasks that *Yapa* staff did not want to do.

Despite the division of labour, *Yapa* participants were all quick to emphasise the cohesiveness of the production groups. *Yapa* participant 5 said:

The job brings us together. Different colours, *Yapa*, *Kardiya*, Chinese. It's good to share dreamings, songlines.

Cross-cultural power dynamics

To explore power dynamics within collaborative teams, study participants were asked about generating ideas, addressing creative disagreements and their overall views on power-sharing.

Generating ideas

In this study, all participants spoke of an idea-generation process that prioritised *Yapa* input. *Yapa* staff all said they felt supported to pursue their creative ideas and interests. *Yapa* participant 2 stated:

They [*Kardiya* staff] encourage us to make what we want to make. They're not giving us a piece of paper saying *do this, do it this way* ... they're telling us to do it our way. And they help us with it.

Kardiya staff described their roles in terms of supporting *Yapa* ideas, while also making some creative contributions themselves. *Kardiya* participant 3 explained:

Primarily it's trying to facilitate their [*Yapa*] ideas to make them a reality. So whatever their ideas are, are primary. And if there's something I see that can add to that, I'll put my two cents in.

With respect to their own ideas, *Kardiya* staff all said they would be prepared to concede if there was disagreement from *Yapa* colleagues. *Kardiya* participant 4 stated:

I would explain my idea and why I thought it was good for the production but, ultimately, I would have to concede if I thought he didn't like my idea. Because it's a *Yapa* production and he's the *Yapa* worker, and if he has a problem with one of my ideas, I have to let it go.

Overall, study participants described *Yapa* collaborators as having more power than *Kardiya* collaborators in terms of generating and approving ideas. However, I noticed limits to this power. Although it was not mentioned in the interviews, I observed *Kardiya* staff also determining which ideas were supported. *Yapa* ideas that *Kardiya* staff did not like, did not have time for or felt did not fit within externally funded project guidelines were sometimes subtly sidelined. To some extent, for an idea to come into fruition, *Kardiya* and *Yapa* staff both had to support it.

Addressing creative disagreements

In dealing with creative differences, study participants all indicated that because PAW Media was an Indigenous media organisation, the *Yapa* preferences should be prioritised.

Yapa participants said they felt comfortable speaking up if they disagreed with a collaborator's decision or approach. *Yapa* participant 2 stated:

I'd try to work with them, let them know that I don't like it.

I observed, though, that *Yapa* collaborators generally only felt compelled to speak up when they observed a breach relating to cultural protocol. More general creative differences of opinion usually were voiced only upon consultation. *Kardiya* participant 4 observed reluctance by *Yapa* collaborators to initiate conflict, explaining:

I wish [Yapa] people would be more up-front and say no to things. I think [Yapa] people often find it hard to say no, so they just say yes and then stop turning up.

Generally speaking, *Yapa* participants had the upper hand with creative disagreements within cross-cultural teams; however, this power was strengthened when active consultation processes were in place, rather than when it was assumed that *Yapa* collaborators would speak up if they had a problem.

Power structures

Overall, *Yapa* staff described a balanced power dynamic featuring mutual respect and appreciation. *Yapa* participant 4 stated:

A new *Kardiya* comes in with a blank mind. *Yapa* have worked in the community for most of their life so when *Yapa* are explaining to *Kardiya*, it's like giving the knowledge. And the *Kardiya* is giving the knowledge about what they've done before. So they're like equal in power.

From the *Kardiya* perspective, participants also referred to a mutual dependence within the production process. *Yapa* participant 4 stated:

I think it's genuine collaboration. Many of our projects wouldn't be made without *Kardiya* producers, but also couldn't be made without the input of *Yapa* workers and the *Yapa* who contribute to the stories.

Overall, participants expressed a view that power was shared equally between *Yapa* and *Kardiya* collaborators; however, these equal power dynamics should not be considered fixed, but rather as shifting over time, depending on the individual relationships, personalities, production frameworks and circumstances involved.

Perceptions of ideal participation

In order to understand whether and how improvements could be made in relation to Aboriginal participation, study participants were asked about their ambitions for ideal participation in the workplace. Here, *Yapa* and *Kardiya* perspectives differed significantly.

Kardiya staff shared a view that ideal Aboriginal participation was synonymous with *Yapa* workers taking control of all aspects of production, leaving *Kardiya* roles redundant. *Kardiya* participant 3 stated:

I personally feel that if someone's coming here from a *Kardiya* world, or is *Kardiya*, their job should be to make their job irrelevant. So basically, by the time you leave, someone [Yapa] should be able to do your [Kardiya] job.

Kardiya participants voiced a level of disappointment that an autonomous Aboriginal model had not eventuated. *Kardiya* participant 4 stated:

You always hope in these [Kardiya] roles that you're leaving a legacy, and when you go, [Yapa] people will continue to work as they have with you. I've really given the [Yapa] fellas I work with every opportunity to learn enough to be able to do these productions without me, but that said, when I went away there were several months where I wasn't there and nothing happened.

Kardiya participant 1 expressed a resigned view that an autonomous Indigenous model would be ideal, but was not currently feasible:

Look, ideally it would be entirely *Yapa* [working at PAW Media] of course. But the reality is that *Kardiya* have the skills from the outside world that *Yapa* want ... It's a necessary partnership, it's maybe not the ideal thing, but we just need to find ways to make it work best.

In relation to the nine *Yapa* study participants, only two expressed a desire to move towards a model of Aboriginal autonomy in the workplace. *Yapa* participant 1 stated:

Well that's a dream of mine. That's what us *Yapa* mob got to do, work towards that, for *Yapa* to run the organisation how we want it run.

Yapa participant 2 shared this view, stating:

It'd be good if it was all Aboriginals working, it'd be really good because we can show people of other communities, and towns around, that there's an Aboriginal organisation that's just run by Aboriginal people, no other workers.

The majority of *Yapa* participants, however, expressed a desire not to work towards an Aboriginal-only model at PAW Media, instead preferring to retain the co-creative teams. *Yapa* participant 5 stated:

I prefer to keep going as it was before, *Kardiya* and *Yapa* working together.

A few reasons were given for this preference. *Yapa* participants said they wanted to continue learning new skills from *Kardiya* staff, and that they also generally enjoyed the cross-cultural company. *Yapa* participant 7 stated:

It's important that we need *Kardiya* coming into the community, and they become like our family in the organisation. It's important we have *Kardiya* coming in to share their ideas and experience.

Participants also stated that by having *Kardiya* staff consistently in the office, *Yapa* staff members could be absent from work in order to participate in other cultural commitments. *Yapa* participant 4 said:

Yeah, at least it's good to always have someone [*Kardiya*] to take over. For us *Yapa*, there's always something coming up, like cultural reasons and sorry business. Like ceremonies. We don't have a date, it just happens. We can't be here all the time at the desk.

Finally, a couple of *Yapa* participants also mentioned that without *Kardiya* staff as gatekeepers, local family disputes or obligations might interfere with appropriate allocation of work resources. In summary, although an Indigenous-only model was advocated by *Kardiya* facilitators, this lacked support from most *Yapa* participants. Instead, from a *Yapa* perspective, there was a strong, although not unanimous, desire to continue working within the current cross-cultural co-creative model.

Recommendations for improved participation

Yapa and *Kardiya* participants were asked about current barriers to Aboriginal participation, and how these could be improved within the current co-creative structure. The suggestions from all interviewees related to improving the facilitation skills and approaches of *Kardiya* staff, so they could best support local participation. *Yapa* participant 8 explained:

We have no problem with *Kardiya* coming and working, just make sure they respect the community and can work with the community.

Language training

A key barrier to collaboration was the fact that *Kardiya* facilitators lacked local language skills. Most *Kardiya* staff only knew a handful of phrases in Warlpiri, and cross-cultural communication at PAW Media was carried out primarily in English. While most *Yapa* staff had good verbal English language skills, some said they still struggled to comprehend everything *Kardiya* staff said. *Yapa* participant 7 explained:

The tricky things are the [English] words that are unexpected and that I can't understand. I go back to them and I try to understand, but sometimes I just can't understand.

Moreover, *Kardiya* staff recognised that limited local language comprehension restricted their cultural knowledge. *Kardiya* participant 3 stated:

We have just got to learn language. It automatically gives us massive insights into the people we're working with. Because language is the key to how people think, operate and understand the world ... I feel like it really should be part of our work, every week, with *Yapa* staff training us.

Cultural inductions

A second barrier to *Kardiya* staff facilitating participation was a lack of local cultural knowledge, particularly upon commencement of employment. *Yapa* participant 4 explained:

Some *Kardiyas*, they don't understand *Yapa* way, *Yapa* law. Some *Kardiyas*, they're new, and they just come and they don't know what's going on. It's really different for them.

Kardiya staff all lamented not receiving more than a very brief cultural induction, and advised that this needed to be changed. *Kardiya* participant 4 said:

I found it quite challenging not really having any training ... not with the cross-cultural context.

Kardiya participant 3 added:

I think it's essential that a more thorough cultural induction be implemented as part of our start of employment.

Multiple recommendations were made about what should be included in induction training. These were: (1) being taken out on country with an elder to learn about cultural protocols and local kinship systems; (2) spending time in other Yuendumu community organisations; (3) being given relevant literature to read; (4) being mentored by more experienced facilitators; and (5) being given clearer job descriptions.

Yapa participants also suggested that new *Kardiya* staff be encouraged to meet as many people in the community as possible upon arrival. *Yapa* participant 1 stated:

The idea is to get to know the community, and respect the community, mingle with people, just talk. Share ideas. Tell us about yourself. What you do and what in the past you have done. That makes it easy for community to relate to you.

Project-selection guidelines

Many of PAW Media's projects involved funding or commissions from external agencies. At times, pressures such as deadlines and expectations of high production values created barriers for Aboriginal participation. Given that *Yapa* collaborators could often be absent from work due to competing commitments, *Kardiya* staff said they sometimes felt compelled to work alone to meet funder deadlines and expectations. *Kardiya* participant 3 explained:

A lot of it is the pressure of delivery. Things actually need to get finished. If there are no *Yapa* around, *Kardiya* have just got to do it, regardless of what's going on.

Moreover, in order to meet deadlines, initial grant applications were sometimes rushed through without proper consultation or involvement of *Yapa* staff. This sometimes left *Kardiya* facilitators stuck finishing projects in which *Yapa* staff members were never interested. *Kardiya* participant 4 suggested:

Maybe there should be rules – like no project should be conceived by a *Kardiya* staff member without significant *Yapa* involvement, or no funding should be sought for a project unless it is being driven by a *Yapa* staff member.

Advanced facilitation training

Kardiya staff interviewed in this study all had strong technical media skills and previous experience engaging with Indigenous cultures. However, none had received much formal facilitation or community development training. A few staff said it had taken them time to learn to step back in their collaborations to create space for local input. Both *Yapa* and *Kardiya* study participants identified a tendency for *Kardiya* staff to rush or take over projects. *Kardiya* participant 4 said:

I've seen other *Kardiya* facilitators take over and pretty much make productions themselves, then just tack a *Yapa* name on as director, which I think is really wrong.

Kardiya participant 3 added:

We [*Kardiya*] like to control things, because there's risk involved; otherwise it could all go pear-shaped.

Yapa study participants also noticed over-zealous tendencies in some *Kardiya* staff. *Yapa* participant 6 said:

They [*Kardiya*] are not always patient, but we need that patience to be there, to show cultural respect.

Staff retention

An overall barrier to Aboriginal participation at PAW Media was the high turnover of *Kardiya* staff. *Yapa* staff spoke of the strain of regularly saying goodbye to *Kardiya* colleagues and friends, then having to invest time in 'breaking in' replacements. *Yapa* participant 4 stated:

Every year it's hard. I see friends going away. And then another one comes and it takes them time to get into it. I've seen that happening for 15 years, new people coming in. And I feel sad for the ones who left.

Kardiya staff also recognised that they became more effective in their roles over time. *Kardiya* participant 4 said:

I feel I was a lot better at my job after being there for three years than just being there a couple of months ... It takes a long time to understand how things work.

A couple of *Kardiya* staff named burnout as a contributing factor. *Kardiya* participant 3 said:

Sometimes *Kardiya* staff get a bit of martyr syndrome. They feel like they need to burn themselves out. I've seen that happen, people being hospitalised because they just feel like they need to go to the 'enth degree.

Yapa staff said their *Kardiya* collaborators usually left because they missed friends and family. *Yapa* participant 7 explained:

They probably get sad being here away from their mob. I think they need more time to spend with family, then they can come back here if they want.

Thus, while staff retention can be difficult to ensure, investigating options for extended leave and professional development could be worthwhile.

Discussion

This study explored Aboriginal participation within co-creative, cross-cultural production teams at PAW Media by examining the motivations, labour distribution, power dynamics, ideals and barriers related to that participation, as described by study participants. Overall, the cross-cultural working relationships found within the teams can be described as *reciprocal partnerships*. *Yapa* and *Kardiya* media workers had different roles and responsibilities, but

power and creative control were shared relatively equally. Both parties expressed mutual respect and appreciation.

It is important to note from the outset that this finding of reciprocal partnerships relied heavily on the individual approaches of the team members involved, rather than the structural set-up of the organisation. Considering the cross-cultural division of labour found at PAW Media, alongside the wider (largely non-Aboriginal) political and economic structures within which RIMOs exist, it would be unsurprising to find lower levels of Aboriginal participation exercised within similarly structured teams comprising different individuals. Structural limitations were recognised by *Yapa* and *Kardiya* staff, and their recommendations to protect and improve participation will be discussed shortly; however, the existence of reciprocal partnerships will first be addressed.

Earlier, I identified two possible ways to evaluate participation. The first was to refer to popular academic models grounded in Western democratic norms, such as Arnstein's (1969) ladder. The second was to evaluate participation by considering its value as dependent on the world-views of participants. Participation through reciprocal partnerships is considered differently depending on which evaluation method is used.

With regard to Arnstein's (1969) ladder, partnership represents the third best of eight types of participation (1969: 217). Partnership is ranked only below delegated power and citizen control (1969: 217). In other words, partnership is a good form of participation, but it would be better if *Yapa* participants had more autonomy within the relationship. Through a mainstream lens, this is a clear and helpful analysis: we know where we are in relation to other types of participation, and what better forms of participation would look like.

Using the second, more context-specific, evaluation approach, attending to participants' own world-views, Aboriginal participation at PAW Media can also be seen as valued. In Warlpiri communities such as Yuendumu, obligation-based roles and responsibilities to land, law, ceremony and family are of central importance (Pawu-Kurlpurlumu, Holmes and Box, 2008). Within this context, *Yapa* media workers valued their participation as a means of providing a community product to local audiences. They were proud to be supporting local language, stories, knowledge, music and culture. Here, participation was less about exercising individual power, and more about performing a role within the larger community. Reciprocal partnerships with *Kardiya* staff were perceived as a generally effective, enjoyable means to achieve this valued participation. So far, therefore, there is little to suggest anything except a positive, valued form of Aboriginal participation within the co-creative structure at PAW Media. To position this within a contextual evaluative framework, I will shortly discuss how these lived experiences compare with participants' perceptions of ideal participation, but first a few points should be made.

As an aside to the previous paragraph, I do not wish to suggest that communities such as Yuendumu represent a static, insulated form of a traditional Aboriginal culture from which to evaluate participation. In Yuendumu – like anywhere – culture is evolving and being shaped by various factors. Western influences exist alongside – sometimes in competition with – Warlpiri norms. Nonetheless, the Warlpiri cultural context remains important for understanding participation in this study.

The finding of valued participation at PAW Media is noteworthy partly because of the low socio-economic status of remote Aboriginal communities such as Yuendumu. Remote community members are less likely to participate in employment or education than other Australians, while issues like domestic violence also negatively impact participation in community life (AIHW, 2015). This suggests valued Aboriginal participation at PAW Media was not just an incidental occurrence as part of wider trend in Yuendumu, but rather a specific and meaningful phenomenon.

The experiences of valued Aboriginal participation at PAW Media documented in this study depended to a significant extent on reciprocal partnerships within a co-creative production model involving *Kardiya* collaborators. Examination of the distribution of labour within teams revealed a reliance on, or preference for, *Kardiya* staff to carry out key tasks. This idea fits theorising of co-creative media as a process enabling participation by allowing facilitators to 'bridge participation gaps' (Spurgeon et al., 2009: 276). This is not to say that valued Aboriginal participation could not also be possible under alternative production models, just that the experiences documented in this study were enabled by co-creative practice.

So far, my discussion has looked at conceptually evaluating Aboriginal participation in its current form at PAW Media. I now turn to considerations of how best to improve participatory practice within the context of the case study. Here, the notion of ideal participation, as perceived by participants, becomes important for creating a benchmark against which to compare current practice.

Despite finding value in the current state of Aboriginal participation at PAW Media, many study participants saw room for improvement. However, significantly, there was a lack of consensus on what an ideal model of participation looked like, and thus what they should be working towards. *Kardiya* staff and a couple of *Yapa* staff supported a future shift towards a more autonomous model of Aboriginal participation at PAW Media. They imagined media production where labour and responsibility were in Aboriginal hands, without non-Aboriginal influence. Yet most *Yapa* study participants rejected this option, instead preferring to retain the collaborative, cross-cultural teams in which they worked within the co-creative model – albeit, importantly, with some improvements.

Having *Kardiya* facilitators working towards an independent Aboriginal model of participation, without the support of the majority of *Yapa* staff, is likely to be problematic. If facilitators are trying to hand over jobs and responsibility to unwilling *Yapa* staff, this may actually lead to disengagement and a weakening of Aboriginal participation. Further, *Kardiya* staff may feel frustrated about their failure to realise their ideal model of participation, and question their role in being there at all.

The support from *Kardiya* staff for a more autonomous Aboriginal participation model was hardly surprising. Coming from non-Aboriginal Australian communities, they were likely to share the Western democratic ideals that promote participant autonomy as an ideal form of participation. In keeping with logic advocated in Arnstein's (1969) ladder, *Kardiya* staff felt this would strengthen Aboriginal participation because *Yapa* media workers would no longer have to share power or creative influence with non-Aboriginal parties. Nonetheless, given that the desire to move towards an autonomous model was challenged by many Aboriginal participants, it would be beneficial for *Kardiya* staff to factor this into informing their facilitation approaches.

Most *Yapa* participants perceived their participation as being better served under a cross-cultural, co-creative production model, and found benefits in employing *Kardiya* collaborators. *Yapa* staff members were not forced to be involved in every aspect of the production process, but could have more freedom to choose how and when to participate. By sharing labour with *Kardiya* staff, they felt better able take time off from work to participate in other family and cultural commitments, knowing day-to-day media operations would continue without them. Overall, as a trade-off for sharing power with *Kardiya* collaborators, *Yapa* workers had more flexibility in choosing the nature of their participation. In addition, *Yapa* staff generally enjoyed the personal relationships formed through cross-cultural collaboration, as well as valuing the skills, technical expertise and resource management to which they had access through employing outside professionals.

I note that the finding of *Yapa* staff preferring a co-creative model may have been influenced by the fact that I, the researcher, was a former *Kardiya* facilitator. *Yapa* participants

may not have wanted to cause offence by voicing a preference for *Kardiya* staff to leave. However, I believe this risk was minimal, as I approached the topic in broad terms during interviews, in reference to the distant future, and because participants gave reasoned answers justifying their positions.

Despite overall satisfaction with the state of affairs at PAW Media, study participants recognised that the current dependence on *Kardiya* staff did limit, or had the potential to limit, Aboriginal participation. If a *Kardiya* staff member was ineffective in their position, this could lead to disengagement from *Yapa* collaborators, and to a situation where a *Kardiya* staff member was left to create Aboriginal media products with very little Aboriginal input. Even for *Kardiya* staff who were suited to their facilitation roles, limited local language skills and cultural knowledge restricted their capacity to facilitate Aboriginal participation – especially upon recent commencement of employment. Thus, in supporting the current dominant *Yapa* view of ideal Aboriginal participation within a co-creative framework, recommendations made by study participants should be considered. These recommendations relate to improving *Kardiya* skills and approaches in terms of: (1) local language; (2) cultural knowledge; (3) project planning; (4) facilitation; and (5) employment longevity.

In prioritising the views of *Yapa* participants, this study proposes a process for improving Aboriginal participation by refining the current co-creative structure. However, the opinions of two *Yapa* participants who supported a shift towards a more autonomous Aboriginal model of participation should not be disregarded. Just because this model was not desired by most *Yapa* study participants at PAW Media does not mean this will not change in the future, when the topic should be reconsidered. It is possible that the default opinion to continue with a co-creative model was in part due to convenience and familiarity with the status quo – a situation from which participants may eventually wish to move away.

Furthermore, by proposing a refined co-creative production model at PAW Media, I do not deny the troubling structural cross-cultural dependency that will continue to perpetuate. The question with which remote Indigenous organisations such as PAW Media have to grapple is whether the benefits of working within a cross-cultural, co-creative structure outweigh the downsides of an ongoing dependency. An alternative structure is surely possible, but would fundamentally change the current model, which is able to capitalise on non-local facilitation, technical expertise and connections with Australia's wider media industry.

Given that, at the time of this study, the model of production collectively preferred by *Yapa* workers at PAW Media was one of cross-cultural collaboration, this should be respected and supported. The co-creative workforce dynamics should be transparent, monitored and strategically supported to support maximum Aboriginal participation within this model.

Limitations

The research outlined in this article should be read as attempting to build a conceptual frame for examining the cross-cultural, collaborative relationships within a co-creative production model, and using that as a basis for addressing questions of participation, power and collaboration. The qualitative findings presented must be understood in the context of a short and small-scale research project, and are therefore not generalisable or transferable. However, the conceptual framework and method used in this study are transferable. Via their transfer, findings from this study could be tested and refined as part of a larger effort to understand, evaluate and improve participation in co-creative media practices, both within and outside the remote Indigenous media sector.

Conclusion

This article outlines findings from the first qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of Aboriginal participation in cross-cultural, co-creative production teams working in a RIMO.

As a case study, it looked at PAW Media, a RIMO based in the remote Northern Territory community of Yuendumu. Through 13 in-depth interviews, grounded in participant observation, the study revealed valued experiences of Aboriginal participation at PAW Media. This participation was facilitated through a co-creative production model with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal collaborators sharing power relatively equally, working in reciprocal partnership.

The significance of this study can be found in both its policy recommendations and its theoretical contributions. In terms of practical benefit, this research demonstrates how participation in co-creative media can be understood, evaluated and subsequently improved. The research examined how *Yapa* producers at PAW Media conceptualised an ideal form of Aboriginal participation, and documented recommendations to help achieve this ideal. The overarching vision for local Aboriginal participation expressed by *Yapa* study participants was one that broadly retained, yet modified, the current co-creative production model. Particular recommendations were made to improve the language skills, cultural knowledge, facilitation abilities and project development approaches of *Kardiya* collaborators.

In reaching this understanding of what an ideal model of Aboriginal participation looked like, as perceived by most *Yapa* participants, it was interesting to note that it conflicted with ideals held by *Kardiya* collaborators. Here, *Kardiya* producers envisioned ideal participation in Aboriginal media production as being an Aboriginal-only affair, existing separately from non-Aboriginal influence. In finding that this ideal was rejected by most (although not all) *Yapa* participants, there is an opportunity for *Kardiya* producers to reconsider their roles in facilitating Aboriginal participation. This does not mean that ideas for alternative models should be disregarded, but that an active process of regular dialogue regarding goals and directions for Aboriginal participation should be engaged in.

In contribution to theoretical debates, this research illustrates an alternative approach to exploring participation by considering it a concept and practice best evaluated by positioning it within the context of participants' world-views. This approach was adopted alongside more traditional academic models for evaluating participation, which are highly valuable in reminding us that participation is linked to power. Used in isolation, traditional models, with their tendency to champion Western democratic ideals, can be problematic in terms of accounting for participation in the largely non-Western context of a remote Aboriginal community. Here, ideas relating to obligation and community service must be considered as contributing to participant perceptions of what constitutes valued participation. This research found mainstream understandings of participation, which idealised maximal participant control, were strongly reflected in the views of *Kardiya* study participants, but emerged less in the views of their *Yapa* counterparts. Instead, the alternative theoretical description of co-creativity was more reflective of *Yapa* thinking on ideal participation in the PAW Media workplace.

Opportunities exist for future studies to advance understandings of participation and co-creative production in community and Indigenous media. In relation to PAW Media, it would be beneficial to further investigate the recommendations presented in this study to develop a practical training program and/or resource. At a broader level, future research could examine participation within other Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations using co-creative media practices. Ideally, these studies could be of a broader scope, considering the organisational and structural factors at play. These studies could look at how participation is affected by internal and external stakeholders such as managers, board members, funding bodies and government policy-makers.

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