Our voice: Indigenous communication as a cultural resource

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September 1993: I’m flying across Australia from Sydney to the centre of the continent – Alice Springs. I’m due to submit my PhD in three weeks, and although this has involved several field trips to the islands of the Torres Strait in Northern Australia, it’s my first extended visit to a remote Aboriginal community. At the start of my research, Eric Michaels (1986) gave me a copy of his influential monograph, *The Aboriginal Invention of Television*, and I am inexorably drawn to the Tanami Desert where his study was based.

A few months earlier, Australia’s first capital city Aboriginal community radio station was launched in Brisbane by Jagera elder Neville Bonner. He proudly spoke on the airwaves of the new Radio 4AAA, declaring (Bonner, 1993): ‘Aboriginal people will be broadcasting to all but more specifically, to our people. We’ll be telling our people. This is our radio station. You are hearing our voice.’ Since then, 4AAA (now 98.9 FM) has remained a focus for Indigenous community life in Brisbane, along with attracting a non-Indigenous audience through its country music format (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009). This urban environment is familiar to me, and I can feel the angst as the verdant green forests of the coastal fringes dissolve into the red and brown ochre sand dunes of the interior.

For the earliest European explorers, the spine of the Great Dividing Range along Australia’s east coast was both a physical and a psychological barrier, beyond which, it was believed, all rivers flowed into a mysterious inland sea. The Europeans’ fruitless searches for this elusive body of water were misinformed and misguided; in fact, an inland sea does exist, but beneath the parched desert lands they traversed in vain. Aboriginal clans knew of its existence and of the places where artesian water reached the surface, providing sustenance for life. This vital information was transmitted from generation to generation through songs, dances and stories – media that pre-dated the European invasion by 60,000 years. This knowledge, and the ways in which it was shared, were tightly controlled in such traditional societies but the social organisation on which this knowledge transfer was based continues to inform successful Indigenous media enterprises (Michaels, 1985; Molnar and Meadows, 2001).

We’ve started our descent to Alice Springs, the centre of the continent for settler Australia but the centre of the world for millennia for the 250 Indigenous nations who have inscribed every element of this ancient landscape into their own cosmologies. From above, it looks to be an empty land, a wilderness – *terra nullius*. But of course it is anything but that. Aboriginal social organisation is centred on the notion of ‘the Dreaming’ – a concept linking law, relationships, time and space. It was a period when the journeys of ancestral beings across the landscape shaped natural features, creating ‘Dreaming Tracks’. These pathways are also communication conduits – media – along which information and people travel (Michaels, 1986). They were significantly disrupted by the launch in 1985 of the Australian telecommunications satellite AUSSAT, 13 years after its Canadian equivalent, ANIK. Overnight, English-language

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television broadcasts presented a threat to existing Aboriginal languages and cultures in remote regions of both countries (Molnar and Meadows, 2001).

By the time I first visited the Torres Strait in 1988, the arrival of satellite television there two years earlier had already impacted negatively on communities, shortening working hours as people stayed home to watch TV soaps. Children had begun to emulate ‘TV heroes’ by carrying knives and getting drunk, and community meetings had become all but impossible to organise because people stayed home to watch the box (Meadows, 1988). But at the launch of the multilingual Radio Torres Strait during that same visit, Torres Strait elder Getano Lui Snr observed (Lui, 1988): ‘Before, we sent letters to the other islands. Now it’s instantaneous. Now we send songs.’ An audience study 15 years later revealed that, despite the power of mainstream television, Indigenous-controlled community radio continues to provide a first level of service to communities across the Torres Strait – and throughout Aboriginal Australia (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009).

My 300-kilometre drive from Alice Springs to Yuendumu through the deep-red sand-drifts of the Tanami Highway confirms all that I have heard and read about the remoteness and the miracle of Indigenous survival. A week later I’m sitting with a group of Warlpiri women, the camp dogs and a handful of non-Indigenous workers to participate in some important ‘finishing business’ – a senior Warlpiri woman passed away two years before and this is her farewell ceremony. It continues through the night and, in the bitter cold of a desert sunrise, the women throw branches onto the fires that surround our circle and perform their last dance. As they do, it is captured on videotape by a local female community worker – another recording for the Warlpiri Media Association’s vast media archive and the birthplace of Aboriginal television in Australia (Molnar and Meadows, 2001).

Fast-forward seven years and a grass-roots, multilingual remote community media network – Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) – begins broadcasting. It’s still attracting engaged audiences as I write (McNair Ingenuity 2014), despite a pragmatic government policy decision that saw it removed from the airwaves in favour of a National Indigenous Television (NITV) service in 2007 (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows 2009). ICTV found alternative, innovative ways of remaining on air while, ironically, NITV has struggled, eventually subsumed by Australia’s multicultural broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service, in 2012.

These few examples of the empowering nature of Indigenous agency support a conclusion drawn from almost 30 years of engagement with Indigenous media in Australia and Canada: that communication is a key cultural resource and an integral part of community social structure (Mercer, 1989). Researchers and research methods are inexorably part of this mélange. Community media have little to do with media, but everything to do with community and the processes of social organisation. To view communication without this context ignores the processes that create, support and sustain our lives.

References

Bonner N (1993). Speech at the opening of community radio station 4AAA. Author’s field notes, 6 April.


