Combatting cultural ‘nerve gas’: maintaining traditional media and culture through local media production in Australia, Canada and Mexico

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Abstract
In Australia in the 1980s, large numbers of remote Indigenous radio stations were established due to a perception that the introduction of ‘mainstream’ satellite programming in remote areas would act as a form of cultural ‘nerve gas’ (Remedio, 2012: 295) that would threaten ‘the very isolation that had helped to preserve what remained of traditional language and culture’ (Guster, 2010: 9). There are parallels here with the development of remote media in Mexico and Canada, where local radio networks focusing on cultural content production were established in response to impending development and imposed sources of mass media. In each country, broadcasters in remote communities have, in recent years, been producing increasing amounts of hyper-local cultural and language-based content. This article examines the role played by Indigenous media in remote areas of Australia, Canada and Mexico in creating an alternative cultural voice for traditional communities and maintaining language and culture.

Keywords
Aboriginal, culture, Indigenous, language, radio, remote

Introduction
The establishment and ongoing evolution of remote Indigenous radio in Australia, Mexico and Canada have followed similar paths over the past three decades. In each country, the motivation for the establishment of these radio networks has focused strongly around an attempt to preserve Indigenous languages and cultures in the face of the encroachment of mainstream media sources. In all three locations, however, initial media structures have failed to fully support and recognise local cultures and languages, with a range of financial, political and structural constraints leading to a homogeneity of content that has not adequately reflected the diversity of remote Indigenous communities. This has resulted in long periods where centralised media structures have provided remote communities with content delivered from sources outside of their local region, with little regard for their own culture and language. In recent years, though, remote Indigenous communities in each location have gained more local ownership and direct control of content, with the resulting local media networks focusing strongly on the preservation of local language and culture.

The development of remote Indigenous media in Australia, Canada and Mexico
In Australia, remote Indigenous radio was established with a clear mandate to recognise and preserve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. A large-scale remote media infrastructure

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was established as the result of the development of the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) in 1984. This followed publication of a report by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs recommending that basic satellite receiving and re-transmission equipment be installed into 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009). As Guster (2010: 9) notes, these stations were established on the basis of a perception that the introduction of ‘mainstream’ satellite programming in remote areas of Australia would threaten ‘the very isolation that had helped to preserve what remained of traditional language and culture’. Indigenous media pioneer James Remedio (2012: 295) notes that:

> Aboriginal people were concerned and considered this type of broadcasting service to be like ‘Nerve Gas’ being beamed in on the community, and bringing in the worst influences of Western culture and would debase the culture people had managed to retain.

This focus on developing media that supported Indigenous voices, language and culture in Australia in the 1980s was part of a broader global concern over the growing power of communications and its impacts on marginalised or developing communities. At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the early 1980s, the ‘defining debate concerned the New World Information and Communication Order, otherwise known as NWICO’, with representatives of developing nations calling for major changes in communications media, ‘labelling the existing order both “neo-colonial” and characterized by “cultural imperialism”’ (Buchanan, 2014: 391). Indigenous radio in Mexico was established within a similar timeframe to its counterpart in Australia, and with similar motivations. The fear of a loss of language and culture that led to the development of remote radio in Australia was also one of the central tenets of the early developmental stage of Indigenous radio in Mexico. Early experiments in using radio as a tool to assist with Indigenous development in Mexico began in 1979, supported by the National Indigenous Institute (INI), the branch of the government in charge of Indigenous affairs. Over the next decade, INI started up other stations throughout Mexico, forming a radio network that broadcast in a range of Indigenous languages (Castells-Talens, 2004: 3).

In Canada, despite a much longer history of Indigenous radio in remote communities, a concerted effort by government to promote local ownership of stations and content by First Nations people did not begin in earnest until the 1980s (Smith and Brigham, 1992: 183), mirroring the efforts of the Australian and Mexican governments around this time to preserve cultures and languages under threat from increasingly available mainstream media. While the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) began to provide broadcasting services to remote areas through the establishment of northern stations as early as the 1950s (Hudson, 1977: 131), most of these early services provided ‘no local programming and no effort was made to meet the specific needs of Natives’ (Smith and Brigham, 1992: 183). In 1983, Canada’s federal government announced the adoption of the Northern Broadcasting Policy, which aimed to maintain and develop Native languages and cultures by ensuring First Nations communities received relevant broadcast programming, including locally produced content (Smith and Brigham, 1992: 186). This new policy established the Northern Native Broadcast Access Program (NNBAP) to underwrite the production costs of regional radio broadcasts in Indigenous languages.

In all three countries, these initial efforts to establish a remote Indigenous media infrastructure that was able to broadcast in, preserve and celebrate Indigenous culture and languages met with limited success. Ongoing issues with a lack of training, ongoing government support, funding and maintenance of infrastructure led to low levels of actual local production of Indigenous cultural content. In the Mexican context, Rodríguez and Castells-Talens (2010:
86) point to a fundamental underlying problem in the language policies of INI, which aimed to both foster Indigenous languages and to turn Spanish into the language of common use, to the eventual detriment of Indigenous language use. In Australia, a lack of ongoing government support for remote broadcasters led to an increasing ‘homogeneity’ of content, with few local stations producing their own language and cultural content, and most relying on satellite content produced in English and outside their communities. In 2001, Molnar and Meadows noted that the amount of material being produced by remote Indigenous radio operators in each community varied greatly, depending on the resources that were available and the motivation of local community members to broadcast their own content (2001: 42). A 2001 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) survey revealed only about 50 out of the 101 existing remote Indigenous stations were producing some form of local content (Meadows and Molnar, 2002: 16). Despite the diversity of local languages and cultures across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, these stations increasingly were serviced by national and regional satellite networks broadcasting predominantly in English. As Alia (2010: 56) notes, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups working in community radio across Australia represent ‘an enormously heterogeneous group, servicing communities that speak more than 350 languages’ (see also Meadows, 2001). The larger retransmission services producing content for these communities throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s did not ‘provide adequately for cultural preservation and growth, as well as positive self-image’ (Remedio, 2012: 296). This model of larger retransmission services was repeated in Canada, with lean funding for stations covering large geographic areas and multiple language groups resulting in low levels of production of localised cultural content.

In all three countries, a revitalisation of the Indigenous radio sector began in the early part of the new millennium. In Mexico, the National Indigenous Institute was reformed in 2003 as the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI), which now oversees the operation of a network of 20 local AM and four FM stations located in regions with high populations of Indigenous people. The coverage of these radio stations ‘has the potential to reach half of the total Indian population, broadcasting in more than 30 languages’ (Ramos Rodríguez, 2005: 157). However, the future of this government-supported network has been impacted by significant budget cuts to the CDI program, which may threaten their financial viability; these cuts have resulted in the loss of large numbers of local staff, producers and broadcasters (Locht, 2016; Mandujano, 2016). In addition to this network of government-supported stations, and unlike Australia and Canada, Mexico is also home to Indigenous radio stations that are funded through local Indigenous cooperatives or NGOs (Castells-Talens, Ramos Rodríguez and Chan Concha, 2009: 531).

In Australia, there has been a strong focus in the past decade on addressing the lack of locally developed media content in remote Indigenous radio stations. Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) were established by the Australian Government following a review of the Australian Government Indigenous Broadcasting Program in 2006. Eight RIMOs now provide the nation’s 81 remote Indigenous stations with training and support to enable them to operate effectively in the remote communities they serve. The result, in recent years, has been a marked increase in the number of local voices on remote Indigenous radio in Australia, as well as in the amount of programming produced locally and reflecting local languages, culture and audience input. Indigenous radio is now the largest sub-sector of community broadcasting in Australia, with 109 radio stations regularly broadcasting Indigenous content (including 22 dedicated Indigenous community radio stations), as well as 81 stations operating in remote Indigenous communities (Community Broadcasting Foundation, 2015). The most recent estimate shows that stations are producing 1392 hours of Indigenous programming each week (Community Broadcasting Foundation, 2015). In Canada, a range of regional Indigenous broadcasting
networks have developed new funding sources in the past decade, allowing them to explore options for extending their broadcasting footprint to more remote First Nations communities, as well as to incorporate more local input from community members with regard to producing programs in local languages and celebrating local cultural practices (Leader, 2015).

While the core infrastructure for Indigenous radio in remote communities has been in place for over 30 years in Australia, Mexico and Canada, the past decade has seen a marked increase in the production of local language and cultural content. As Indigenous communities have successfully overcome economic and political barriers and established more robust and well-staffed radio stations and networks, greater focus is now being placed on working directly with communities to develop localised programming. Traditional broadcasters in these remote communities are adapting both existing media infrastructure and new media technologies to their needs, producing increasing amounts of hyper-local cultural and language-based content. The research project discussed in this article examines the role played by these Indigenous radio stations in remote areas of Australia, Canada and Mexico in creating an alternative cultural voice for traditional communities. It examines the role of remote Indigenous media producers in maintaining language and culture through hands-on local production that involves direct community input.

Research methodology

Research designed to gain a greater insight into the impacts of local broadcasting and cultural content production in remote Indigenous communities in Australia, Canada and Mexico included a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with remote broadcasters. This research focused strongly on gaining insights into the role played by these radio stations in maintaining, sharing and celebrating language and culture, as well as the ways in which stations engage with community members and encourage a participatory approach to cultural media production.

Research into remote Indigenous media is not without problems, and requires critical analysis of the research methodologies we have employed in the past to examine the roles of remote Indigenous media. Smith (2012: 180) notes that research in postcolonial settings can be problematic due to dominant Westernised assumptions behind the research focus of the translation of research into text. As Ezeh (2003: 203) notes, a researcher who visits a different cultural group with expectations informed by an extraneous normative system is likely to be disappointed. Delaney (1998: 298) flags the importance here of conducting and analysing research in a way that does not simply reduce difference to banal universals, or merely celebrate difference. Research carried out in remote communities must therefore begin with the formation of partnerships where ownership rests more clearly with communities than with research institutions and researchers. As Gorman and Toombs (2009: 6) note, ‘a collaborative approach between researchers and Aboriginal communities is pivotal to developing a research project consistent with Indigenous cultural values’. This involves relinquishing some of the power and authority that has often rested with the researcher (Swadener and Mutua, 2008: 41) and recognising the role of community members as ‘sources and local experts in their own right’ (Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis, 2008: 269). Consultation with community and a participatory approach to research enable researchers to avoid ‘boxing and labelling’ Indigenous community members, and their motivations and behaviours, according to categories that do not fit (Smith, 2012: 154).

To ensure that this research project was based strongly on the knowledges and experiences of Indigenous broadcasters and community members themselves, a strong focus was placed on use of participant observation. A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of decolonising research methodologies through developing appropriate methodologies that reflect
cooperative and participatory Indigenous community practices (Braun et al., 2014; Delaney, 1998; Ezeh, 2003; Gorman and Toombs, 2009; Stanton, 2014; Swadener and Mutua, 2008) and recognising the role of community members as ‘sources and local experts in their own right’ (Tomaselli, Dyll and Francis, 2008). As Kawulich (2005: 2) notes, participant observation can be defined as ‘the process enabling researchers to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities’. This form of participatory research is an effective and decolonising methodology in that it aims to ensure that the voices of all community members are heard by engaging people ‘in all aspects of the research process’ (Clark et al., 2009: 346) and is concerned with ‘placing them at the centre of knowledge production’ (Richardson et al, 2013: 18).

Participant observation was used to examine the role played by local announcers in developing cultural content in partnership with community members in three remote Indigenous radio stations in Australia, four in Mexico and three in Canada. This form of observation is ‘a very effective way of finding out what people do in particular contexts, the routines and interactional patterns of their everyday lives’ (Darlington and Scott, 2002: 74). By observing the interactions of announcers with members of their local communities, it was possible to gain some insight into the way in which the audience/producer relationship worked in these remote communities (see also Alia, 2010). This observation method enables researchers, assisted by local Indigenous research assistants, to document and understand the context within which activities and events occur (Clark et al., 2009: 348). As Yin (2011: 122) points out, this way of observing people in a research context ‘emphasises close, intimate, and active involvement’, allowing the researcher to gain specific understandings of how they construct their daily working and social lives. The use of participant observation in this context allowed for a breaking down of the barriers between ‘insider and outsider research’ (see Smith, 2012), resulting in a fuller exploration of the role of Indigenous broadcasters without the use of methodologies that may have caused them to feel uncomfortable or disempowered.

Participant observation was then followed up by semi-structured interviews with radio workers and producers in each location. As Holstein and Gubrium (2002: 120) note, this form of interviewing is an especially useful mode of inquiry because it can result in the production of meanings that address issues relating to particular research concepts. Interviewing local announcers, who are themselves community members, about the role played by their local radio station provides ‘considerable flexibility to the data collection process, both in terms of areas explored and the direction of the discussion’ (Darlington and Scott, 2002: 47). Interviewees were identified based on recommendations from a local research assistant, and ‘chance meeting’ interviews were used wherever possible, reflecting the informal community setting of the research and the successful use of this form of interview by previous researchers in remote Indigenous settings (Meadows, 2002: 261).

All interviews were transcribed and then analysed, along with field notes from participant observation, using NVivo software based on themes and application of codes to data (Rapley, 2004: 27). NVivo allows researchers to analyse transcripts and field notes based on a thematic approach, identifying commonly occurring ideas, phrases and concepts that enable the researcher to discover patterns in data (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003: 26), resulting in the development of theory and identification of particular themes or frames in the context of communication (Jensen, 2002: 247). Sorting of these themes allowed for an examination of the related features of these groups (Yin, 2011: 187) to gain insights into the key features of Indigenous media production in remote communities in Australia, Mexico and Canada.

Table 1 provides a summary of the interviews conducted.
Table 1: Interviews conducted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Radio station</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NPA Radio</td>
<td>Cape York, Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopevale Radio</td>
<td>Cape York, Australia</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wujal Wujal Radio</td>
<td>Cape York, Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio XHFCE, Huayacocotla</td>
<td>Veracruz, Mexico</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio XETCZ, Cuetzalan</td>
<td>Puebla, Mexico</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio Tosepan, Cuetzlan</td>
<td>Puebla, Mexico</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio Tzinaca, San Miguel Tzinacapan</td>
<td>Puebla, Mexico</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFWE-FM</td>
<td>Alberta, Canada</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHON-FM</td>
<td>Yukon, Canada</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFNR-FM</td>
<td>British Columbia, Canada</td>
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The three radio stations investigated in Australia service remote communities in the Cape York region of Far North Queensland. The communities in which these stations operate are classified as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ by the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), indicating the problematic nature of providing government and other essential services because of their extreme isolation from major metropolitan areas. They are part of a network of stations provided with administrative and training support by Queensland Remote Aboriginal Media (QRAM), an Aboriginal-controlled and government-funded organisation. Prior to 2011, these stations received a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous programming from a range of media networks in other parts of the country. All of these stations received substantial technical upgrades to their studio equipment in 2012 and 2013, and are part of a network known as ‘Black Star’, which provides them with locally produced content 24 hours a day, to which they can contribute community-specific news and information. The radio stations in Wujal Wujal and Hopevale broadcast specifically to their local communities, while NPA Radio services five communities at the very northern tip of Cape York that are geographically close, but have diverse histories and cultures, including a mix of traditional communities, communities that were moved there forcibly by the government in the second half of the twentieth century and communities with populations mainly comprising Torres Strait Islander people who have settled on the mainland.

The four Mexican radio stations investigated broadcast in the states of Puebla and Veracruz. Radio XHFCE in Huayacocotla, known as ‘The Voice of the Peasants’, is operated with the support of the Jesuit church. It broadcasts 12 hours a day in Náhuatl, Tepehua, Otomí and Spanish, reaching a large number of remote communities across the Sierra Norte region of Veracruz. Radio XECTZ, known as ‘The Voice of the Sierra Norte’, broadcasts from Cuetzalan, and is part of the Cultural and Indigenous Radio Stations System of the National Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI). It broadcasts 13 hours a day, reaching about 55 towns in the Sierra Norte region of Puebla and 18 towns in Veracruz. The station’s programming consists of around 80 per cent in the Náhuatl and Totonac languages, with the rest in Spanish. Radio Tosepan is a small independent radio station also based in Cuetzalan and funded by a local Indigenous cooperative. Run by one or two volunteers, with other colleagues on the air sporadically in their spare time, the station aims to support the work of the Tosepan cooperative, and to strengthen local community values and the language. Content is broadcast in Náhuatl, reaching around 20 nearby Indigenous communities. Radio Tzinaca 104.9 FM is a
new local station that began broadcasting in November 2012. It broadcasts primarily in Náhuatl with occasional segments aired in Totonac, servicing the small local community and areas surrounding San Miguel Tzinacapan, which is located 5 kilometres from Cuetzalan.

The three Canadian radio stations investigated broadcast to large numbers of remote Indigenous communities in the Yukon, Northern Alberta and Northern British Columbia. CFWE-FM began broadcasting in 1987 in the north Alberta community of Lac La Biche, and now has its main studio in Edmonton. It broadcasts to 85 remote communities, with its own news service and a format that includes ‘between 25 and 30 per cent Aboriginal content’ (Leader, 2014) and 16 hours of broadcasting in community languages, mainly Cree and Dene. CHON-FM is based in Whitehorse in the Yukon, and began broadcasting in 1984. It broadcasts to the traditional communities of 14 Yukon First Nations, as well as their satellite communities, and broadcasts community and public service announcements in languages including Gwich’in, Hän, Kaska, Northern Tutchone and Southern Tutchone. The station operates its own news service, producing regular bulletins and at least two to three unique local news stories a day. CFNR-FM is based in Terrace in northern British Columbia, and was established in 1985. It broadcasts through 50 transmitters that cover most of the remote First Nations communities throughout northern British Columbia. The station has its own news department, and produces specific informational programming that provides news to First Nations audiences, including a one-hour weekly documentary show focused on regional and national Indigenous issues and a regular local program that focuses on local community.

Preservation and sharing of language and culture

Indigenous radio has emerged in Australia, Mexico and Canada as a key way of preserving cultural traditions and languages. In each location, Indigenous people speaking a multitude of local languages have, until recently, only heard English, Spanish or French spoken on radio stations. In Australia, several researchers have highlighted the important role played by Indigenous radio in maintaining language and culture. Meadows and Morris (1998: 75) highlight the importance of local control over media production and the results of this local control in maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language. Meadows and van Vuuren’s (1998: 104) research into the role of Indigenous radio station 4AAA found a strong local feeling of connection with, or ‘ownership’ of, the station among listeners, with audience members expressing what was defined as a sense of the station’s ‘cultural accountability’. The role of Indigenous community broadcasting in maintaining languages and culture and promoting cross-cultural dialogues, as well as supporting local forms of music and dance, has also been noted by other Australian researchers (Ford, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009; Watson, 2013).

In Latin America, as Castells-Talens, Rodríguez and Concha (2013: 525) note, radio has played a similar role in providing a medium where ‘Indigenous languages that had been marginalised, if not persecuted, for centuries’ are now part of the airwaves. Mexico has the largest number of Indigenous language speakers in Latin America (Castells-Talens, Rodríguez and Concha, 2013: 526) and the eighth largest Indigenous population in the world – approximately 12 million people. This represents ‘more than a tenth of the total population of Mexico, which comprises nearly 60 ethnic groups each with their own distinct language and culture’ (Ramos Rodríguez, 2005: 156). These language groups increasingly are serviced by specific local radio stations, with formats that focus on using and maintaining local languages and dialects.

Remote First Nations radio in Canada has also played a key role in maintaining local culture and languages. Fairchild (1998: 164) notes that the strategies for cultural survival on the part of Aboriginals living in Canada ‘have increasingly included media in recent years’. The development of community radio in remote communities in Canada was – as was the case in
Australia and Mexico – largely driven by the perception of a cultural threat from mainstream media sources (Minore and Hill, 1991: 112). Canadian researchers (Fraser, 1994; Valaskakis, 1988) have noted the perceived threat to Inuit languages and traditions by a satellite-driven ‘invasion’ of southern Canadian and American television. As a result, remote Indigenous radio in Canada was typified from its earliest stages by a heavy emphasis on native language use (Hudson, 1977: 132), Minore and Hill (1991: 111) note that through the development of an Indigenous broadcasting network in Canada, First Nations people were given control of ‘weapons with which to fight the erosion of their languages and culture’.

In Australia, Mexico and Canada, use of Indigenous languages by local radio announcers has been essential in creating content relevant to local audiences. All three countries have a multitude of Indigenous languages, and it is only through local Indigenous radio that specific local and regional languages are heard on the airwaves. This style of hyper-local broadcasting recognises the importance of local languages for people who may understand limited amounts of English, Spanish or French, and for whom specific issues and cultural concepts can only be expressed in Indigenous languages. An announcer at Radio Huayacocotla in Mexico summarised the importance of using local language in broadcasting to the station’s remote radio audiences:

In Náhuatl, there are some ideas you can’t translate it to Spanish. Even though there’s a word in Spanish with similar meaning, the essence of the idea is different. The fact that the radio speaks our languages, it makes the radio station closer to us, closer to the audience.

Australia has some strong parallels with this observation, as pointed out by an announcer from the Northern Peninsula Area of Australia:

That’s where local language becomes important – you can relate to it because you speak the language. It won’t work if you have an outside broadcaster telling the people – unless they have that country’s peoples’ sayings or are giving out the information in the language form.

In all three countries, there is also a strong understanding among radio workers that they are working to preserve languages that may otherwise be lost, especially in the younger generations. An interviewee in Edmonton, Canada noted that many of the First Nations languages in northern Alberta are close to being lost. There are close parallels here with the observation by an announcer in San Miguel Tzinacapan in Mexico that:

We’re living in a world where cultures and traditions are being lost and we want to rescue part of them: the language and the way of thinking of each and every native, because it’s something completely different to that of people in the city.

The goal of protecting language and culture through broadcasting has been central to the formation of many of the stations that are part of this research project. An announcer in Terrace, Canada noted that:

We started off to protect our culture, our heritage, our language. Communities have their own language, and through radio they can talk in their own language, tell stories, and honour the chiefs, or even recognize a chief that has passed on.

This concept of using radio as a medium for promoting the importance of culture and language was reinforced by an announcer at Radio XECTZ in Cuetzalan, Mexico:

While transmitting, people really like to hear about words that are no longer used. Due to the new media, young people have strongly grown apart from our roots. Everything the market offers, the products they sell, and TV, for example, teach us to forget what is ours and to lean towards something that doesn’t belong to us, that doesn’t have anything to do with our culture. So what people like is that we always speak in Nahuatl and,
above all, they like it to be as pure as possible. What for? Well, for the younger ones that listen to us to learn, to value again what the language is.

In all three countries, local languages are included throughout the daily broadcasts and regular on-air programming. In Canada, language broadcasting includes a wide variety of languages and dialects, with an announcer in Terrace noting that, broadcasting in northern British Columbia, Terrace covers a footprint that includes ‘about 23 different dialects’. An announcer in Whitehorse observed that ‘language is usually woven through the day, through broadcasting, public service announcement, language lessons, cultural lessons’. In the Yukon, broadcasting in languages reaches First Nations audiences living in very isolated parts of the country:

They would be listening to it in their communities, they would be listening to it on the trap lines. And they would be able to hear about our culture and hear our language. This radio station has become a part of who we are.

In Australia, Mexico and Canada, radio stations are playing a key role in promoting, sharing and often organising cultural events. Announcers at NPA Radio in Australia actively promote key cultural events such as tombstone openings, weddings and NAIDOC events. They also regularly feature interviews with representatives of the cultural centres, as well as playing local music, promoting local bands, and recording and broadcasting traditional ‘choral’ or ‘chorus’ music. In Hopevale and Wujal Wujal in Australia, announcers play a similar role in promoting local culture and cultural events, and are active in recording local cultural content such as traditional music and the stories of community members.

In Canada, radio stations produce a range of programs that focus strongly on celebrating First Nations culture and community life. The station in Edmonton, for example, produces a program throughout northern Alberta called One People, Many Lives, which focuses on ‘Aboriginal people doing things that change their community or their family – things that kind of broaden their horizons and bring focus to our culture’. They also produce a program called Footprints, focusing on the legacy left by Aboriginal people who have passed on, and another called Heartbeat of Nations, which ‘focuses on traditional pow-wow round-dance music, kind of keeping our Aboriginal traditional music alive’.

In the Mexican Indigenous radio stations investigated, there is perhaps even stronger evidence of the important role played by remote radio workers in promoting and broadcasting cultural events. An announcer from Radio Tzinaca noted that the station broadcasts a range of programs where local people talk about the history of the community and how it developed, as well as an oral tradition workshop hosted by community elders. An announcer in Cuetzalan noted that:

People like a lot to speak about customs, so that they don’t die out: preparing an altar for the Day of the Dead, how it is celebrated, what is done on November the 1st and the 2nd and why is it done … When the radio appeared, all of that started to sprout again, including all of the music that was already dying out.

Common to the Mexican stations that are part of this research project is the role announcers play in embedding themselves in all aspects of organisation and recording of cultural events. The radio station in Huayacocotla, for example, is intimately involved in the planning of key community festivals, and provides economic and organisational support to local communities to ensure the success of these important cultural events. Observing the role of station workers in the 2013 Santa Cecilia festivities in the remote towns of the Sierra Norte region, it was possible to see that they were regarded as both key organisers of the event and also as community members. Announcers played key roles in recording and broadcasting the event, including hosting musical performances associated with the festival, yet at the same time they interacted with community members and joined in the celebrations themselves. This embedded involvement of community broadcasters was outlined by an announcer in Huayacocotla:
We go to a meeting previous to the festivity. The radio organises part of it and … for example, the invitation from the authorities, the invitation from the women, we broadcast it days, even weeks before for the celebrations for example. And it also participates in organising it with logistics for that day. Two or three days before the festival, I gather with the women to ask them what else they need, what help they need. Probably not economic help, but to promote, from the radio station, that a patronage festival will be held and that it is important that people join it as well.

Observation of announcers in remote areas of both Australia, Mexico and Canada revealed a style of broadcasting that reflects local cultural norms, language use and shared community understandings. The key to this is the local cultural understanding that announcers bring to their roles as broadcasters and producers, which is evident in the way they present information to their community when on air. This important role of local producers as a culturally embedded part of their community was summarised by an announcer in Hopevale, Australia:

This is a unique community. Our issues here are very different from those in other communities, just because of our history, our location – everything. So I think having someone who understands local community issues, and can pass on the information we need, is really important. And it allows community members to feel valued – like when the kids get to hear their own voices, or they make their own music and their families and friends and the whole community can hear that.

This role of announcers as local conduits for community cultural content was reinforced by an announcer at Cuetzalan in Mexico, who believes that ‘radio can strengthen the language, the identity, because all of our vision, our relationship with the moon, the sun, the sown land, our way of seeing life, death, birth, the way we work the fields, it’s all in our language’.

The cultural understanding that local Indigenous announcers bring to their roles also includes the use of local slang, storytelling, gossip and humour, as noted by this announcer in Edmonton, Canada:

Our audience likes the laughter. One of the things about Aboriginal people is the humour, so they capture that. There’s a lot of laughing if you listen to our morning show with Wally and Angela. There’s a lot of laughing, a lot of humour, and sometimes its Indian humour, which only Indian people understand, and they’ll laugh at it.

Conclusion
To some degree, remote Indigenous radio stations in Australia, Canada and Mexico adhere to what are ‘almost universally understood practices’ (Browne, 1998: 7) in producing and broadcasting on-air content, especially with the production of news and information where styles of announcing are similar to many other sectors of community broadcasting. But in delivering cultural content to their local audiences, all the stations involved in this research project use a style of announcing that closely reflects local cultural norms. In all three countries, local announcers producing cultural content often speak in a non-formal and relaxed manner, with long pauses, and typically use a mix of local languages and dialects. Often these are languages that have not been heard on local radio before – indeed, they are examples of ‘languages that had once stayed in the family and in private environments’ and that have ‘now become present in the public sphere’ (Rodriguez, 2001: 3). By providing local community members with access to the airwaves, remote radio stations are ‘taking away the timidity of a shy language and opening the microphones to the people who speak it’ (Castells-Talens, Rodríguez and Concha, 2009: 525).

Broadcasters in each country are highly aware of the important role they are playing in producing language and cultural content that meets community needs and responds to community understandings and priorities. The style of content production in these communities is what Guster (2010: 14) refers to when she speaks of ‘program formats that meet the needs of their Indigenous audiences’. Broadcasting in these communities is typified by the ways in which
the announcers value local cultures and organic processes (Paranjape, 2007: 468). Through this understanding of local culture and language, they are able to fulfil an important role in maintaining social and cultural networks (Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009: 157). As Australian Indigenous broadcaster James Remedio noted in an interview with the Productivity Commission in 1999, ‘the Indigenous broadcasting sector has an essential role to play in maintenance of Indigenous language and culture. It has an essential role to play in providing information, entertainment, to these remote communities.’

This research project shows that the provision of local cultural and language-based content is resulting in a sense of identity and empowerment among Indigenous communities and their members. In remote communities in Mexico, Canada and Australia, empowerment is in a very real sense both a process and an outcome (Singleton et al., 2009: 405). Through providing local audiences with content that reflects and celebrates their specific cultural practices, community members involved in these stations are gaining control over their lives through active participation in the life of their community (Bergsma, 2004: 154). Simply by opening the airwaves to active local participation in cultural content from community members, these radio stations are contributing to what Tabing (2006: 151) describes as ‘democratic communication and empowerment in a real sense’.

Notes
1 Tombstone openings are ceremonies held by people of Torres Strait Islander heritage to unveil the headstone of a dead relative (usually three years after the person passed away).
2 NAIDOC Week celebrations are held across Australia each July to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

References


