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Commentary

Dangerous Dancing: A Commentary on Australian Indigenous Communication Futures

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Abstract
Indigenous communities in Australia have fought for access to the airwaves, despite resistance from the dominant European population. The uncertainty of the government policymaking process has created challenges for Indigenous media producers in appropriating a range of media technologies to serve Indigenous interests. Indigenous-produced media provides a first level of service to communities across the continent but the struggle to maintain this complex communication system continues.

Keywords
Australia; Indigenous communication; Indigenous media; media policy

Issue
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The vastness of the Australian continent only really becomes apparent when you experience it from above; flying across it. It is extraordinary how similar the landscape appears to the highly identifiable Central Australian Aboriginal dot paintings, many of which relate to landscape and our place in it as human beings. From the moment you leave the fringing white beaches of the coastline and head inland, the colours change from the subtle green and yellow hues associated with native forests and agriculture to the deepening white, yellow and red ochres of the Central Australian desert. Dendritic river systems, flowing inland from the Great Dividing Range that stretches for more than 2,500 kilometres along the eastern edge of the continent puzzled the early European explorers who believed the streams flowed into a huge inland sea. They were right in one sense—except that the sea they sought in vain was underground: a massive artesian basin that captures the sporadic rainfall and water flows that define one of the driest continents on earth. The European invaders saw the Great Dividing Range as a barrier to the settlement of this continent, eventually finding ways across it, in many instances following Aboriginal pathways that had existed for millennia before Europeans took their first tentative steps into the mysterious interior. Of course, Aboriginal people were closely watching every detail of the first European visitors with curiosity and trepidation. The clans in northern Australia had traded with the Macassans for possibly one thousand years before the first European contact. This is evident in the extensive rock art that adorns shelters around the Kimberley coast and the Top End. They followed the progress of the strange European sailing vessels, negotiating reefs and coastal waterways in search of new worlds to conquer. Aboriginal people used their own long-established communication systems to alert neighbouring clans of the potential threat to their way of life so that groups living along the coast knew of the approaching ships months before they were sighted, the news carried by a network of Aboriginal runners. Aboriginal clans watched unnoticed and unbelieving as hapless European explorers seeking knowledge of the interior of the continent starved and died of thirst within easy reach of some of the country's richest sources of food and water. The details of these oases had been inscribed into Indigenous cosmology, again using a network of communication that was invisible to European senses. Many of these sites

are significant or sacred sites, incorporated into Dreaming Tracks or Songlines which criss-cross the Australian continent. Many of these tracks were actual pathways along which Aboriginal clans travelled in search of seasonal food or to take part in ceremonial gatherings, trade or to strengthen community social structures. These pathways can also be considered as lines of communication along which information travelled for both practical and ceremonial reasons. Communication networks were most certainly nothing new to Aboriginal Australians (Michaels, 1986). In fact, these networks represented a critical dimension of their survival.

The European concept of four seasons—still predominant in much of the heavily populated parts of the country—have little relevance in regions where Aboriginal clans identify up to six or seven different annual cycles based on local climatic variations, coupled with intimate knowledge of plant and animal behaviour. At the time of the European invasion, an estimated 250 different languages with around 500 dialects, divided the continent into countries, an important identifying concept still used by Aboriginal people today. They were civilisations as different as modern European nations in terms of their culture and language. One language group, which usually defined a country, would commonly speak the tongues of adjoining countries and so Indigenous people were fluent in four, five or six languages. English was just another one but with it, came the force of authority and power.

To the first Europeans, this was terra nullius—the so-called empty land!

Based on this monumental misunderstanding of the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal cultures, perhaps it is not surprising that the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the Great South Land began so badly. The European invasion began in earnest in 1788 with the arrival in Botany Bay—near the present day city of Sydney—of the first fleet of settlers from England. The majority were convicts, their sentences of death or life imprisonment commuted to transportation to the new British colony of New South Wales. For many, it may have seemed a welcome reprise from the disease-ridden prison hulks moored in London's River Thames, used to house felons because of overcrowding in more traditional gaols. But the unfamiliarity of the landscape and environment, for many, raised a new challenge—survival. The First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. The first Aboriginal prisoner was taken into custody on New Year's Eve that year.

The fractious relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the first decades of settlement set up a framework for thinking about Aboriginal people that has been difficult to shift in the intervening 230 years. The stereotypes ignored the extensive Indigenous knowledge of the environment and how to manage it sustainably. The impact of this massive oversight is perhaps only now becoming apparent as climate change emerges as the biggest threat to global survival.

It has been almost impossible for Indigenous people to break away from the frameworks imposed by those first few decades of contact with the non-Indigenous world. Coupled with the theft of Aboriginal land in the name of progress, it has left behind generations of Indigenous people with no economic basis on which to base their survival and sustainability. And, like many other Indigenous peoples around the world, they continue to survive on the fringes of mainstream society. Of course, there are many examples of achievement by Indigenous people around the globe and they need to be celebrated. But a majority remains trapped by the economic framework forced upon them by the harbingers of global capitalism.

Introduced communication systems have played a central role in perpetuating the myths and stereotypes that continue to define Indigenous people in modern Australian society. This long history of indifference and racism is a major reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people moved to appropriate imposed communication systems for their own use—and on their own terms. The first experiments involving radio and Indigenous communities were in 1938 and with villages in the Torres Strait. This government-controlled scheme went no further and it was almost 40 years before the first Indigenous voices were heard regularly on the radio airwaves. An Australian federal government decision in the 1970s to support a national community radio sector was the catalyst for Indigenous communication to expand. Initially, Indigenous voices had to find a niche beside English language or multicultural programs through Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). The first Aboriginal community radio licence was issued in 1984 to the innovative Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) with second licence—and first capital city radio station—going to the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association (BIMA) in 1993. It was a modest beginning but it heralded an explosion in interest as Indigenous communities from across the country realised the potential power in having access to their own broadcasting network, largely on their own terms. Although it was a federal government-funded program, local communities had some autonomy over program production and content.

Australia launched its own communication satellites in 1985, raising the stakes considerably. Remote Aboriginal communities, in particular, voiced their concerns about English language television programs beaming into outback communities who were still waiting for their first reliable telephone service. Canada had dealt with the same challenges 12 years earlier with the launch of its own telecommunications satellites with the ability to send English language broadcast televi-

sion into remote Inuit communities across the Arctic. It was described then by Inuit activist and politician Rosemary Kuptana as ‘neutron bomb television’. A decade later in Australia, Aboriginal linguist Eve Fesl described mainstream television broadcasts into remote Aboriginal communities as ‘a cultural nerve gas’ (Molnar & Meadows, 2001).

These responses by Indigenous people in both countries led to government inquiries into the possible impact of television on remote communities. In Australia, several investigations confirmed the potential for English language television to threaten the survival of already endangered Aboriginal languages, a form of technological determinism. In 1988 when I first travelled to remote islands in the Torres Strait to explore this, it was clear that the arrival of mainstream television on the outer islands had impacted significantly on daily life, including changing fishing schedules to enable crew to watch television soap operas! Of greater concern was the potential loss of endangered languages like Meriam Mir, spoken only by a small speech community of around 200 on Mer and several adjacent islands perched at the northernmost extremity of the Great Barrier Reef. Today, of the 250 Indigenous languages spoken in Australia at the time of first contact, it is estimated that fewer than 50 survive, with around 20 described as being in a healthy state.

As a direct result of Aboriginal concern over the impact of English language television, 80 remote communities received in 1987 a relatively inexpensive technology package—the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS)—that allowed them to switch off incoming mainstream television programs and to substitute their own. While seemingly good in theory, in practice, communities were offered little or no training in how to create their own programs and the equipment provided was of poor quality, totally unsuited for the often extreme effects of desert dust or salt air corrosion in the remote communities that were the target of this scheme. Within a year or so, many of the BRACS units had fallen into disrepair with no funding for maintenance or support. In some communities, people living there still had no idea what to do with this strange technological array. In one case in North Queensland, a local community’s BRACS equipment arrived unannounced one day on the back of a large truck. When the small group of technicians left three days later in a cloud of dust, no one in the community was any the wiser as to what this equipment was for nor how to use it! Stories like this were commonplace as the government enacted its ill-considered policy. Fortunately, in a handful of communities who managed to enlist talented, local program makers, Aboriginal producers ‘invented’ a new kind of television that was very different to its European counterpart. American anthropologist Eric Michaels’ work in the Yuendumu community in central Australia in the early 1980s revealed what was possible when communities were able to use Western communication technologies within a framework that was socially and culturally appropriate (Michaels, 1986). His work led to responses like BRACS although his original recommendations ceded far more control to community producers than the flawed federal government model.

In spite of a policy vacuum, Indigenous media in Australia has continued to expand, although its application remains uneven across the country. Community radio is the major outlet for Indigenous voices on the airwaves with almost 40 radio stations in remote, rural and urban centres dedicated to Indigenous programming. There are eight regional radio networks that coordinate between them around 150 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services. These services include some local video production although most operate primarily as radio stations. A creative alliance among remote regions led to the emergence in 2001 of the Indigenous Remote Television Association (IRCA) that at its peak, produced around 300 hours of original video content each year on a shoestring budget. However, moves to establish a national Indigenous television service, driven primarily by urban-based Aboriginal broadcasters and federal government policymakers, led to ICTV being unceremoniously taken off the air in 2007 to make way for the new National Indigenous Television (NITV) service. This policy decision created an unresolved conflict between Indigenous media producers in the cities and in those in the bush communities. Essentially, Indigenous communications producers were told if they did not accept the government’s NITV package, they would receive no funding at all—hardly a way to negotiate Indigenous air rights (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2009; Meadows, Forde, Ewart, & Foxwell, 2007). There was little choice: and although ICTV subsequently found other ways of delivering its programs to remote communities via satellite and the Internet where appropriate download speeds existed, the majority of Australian television viewers still cannot view the innovative programs produced by the bush communities. The gradual roll-out of high speed broadband to remote Australia will change all that from 2016—in theory, at least (Indigenous Community Television, 2016).

The lack of a coherent Indigenous media policy continues to seriously limit the creative potential of Indigenous media producers, particularly those who live well away from the capital cities. There is still no formal recognition of the importance of Aboriginal languages and cultures in Australia’s *Broadcasting Services Act* putting this country out of step with comparable neighbours like New Zealand and Canada. Indigenous media policy has become conflated with a broad ‘close the gap’ scheme, initiated by the federal government to address the disadvantage experienced by remote Indigenous communities at a number of levels. Unfortunately, communication has become all but invisible in

this melange, belying its primary function to provide Indigenous communities with a first level of service. The Indigenous communication policy process has been subsumed by the daily political demands driving the prime minister's department that has taken over management of Indigenous media policy and production.

Regardless, Indigenous media producers continue to struggle for communication equality. Remote Indigenous Australia remains the most digitally excluded with an estimated 1,000 communities still without access to a reliable Indigenous media service (Featherstone, 2011). The growth of Indigenous media in Australia is akin to a dangerous dance—two steps forward and one step backwards—and although the establishment of the national Indigenous television network NITV is to be applauded, it features little content which reflects remote Indigenous Australia (National Indigenous Television, 2016). In many ways it was in 'the bush' where Indigenous communication was 'invented'. While this does not deny the significance of urban-based Indigenous media producers—after all, the majority of Indigenous people live in Australia's cities and regional towns—the lack of acknowledgement and recognition of the central importance of local media remains a challenge.

The uncertainty of policymaking in general, coupled with the institutional specifics of the Indigenous media sector in different social, cultural and political settings, continue to make it a difficult process to define. But this should not prevent anyone from trying. The clear evidence of innovation by generations of Indigenous media producers suggests the need to create a space for experimentation from the bottom up. Top-down, government-initiated programs have failed spectacularly to deliver media autonomy and to take account of the cultural diversity that defines Indigenous Australia. There have been many excellent bottom-up innovations that have successfully melded traditional Indigenous cultural frameworks with the latest communication technologies. It can be done; but only if Indigenous people are listened to and allowed to control the process. A lack of dialogue between Indigenous media sector workers and federal government policy makers is an acute flaw in the current process. The uncertainty of the policy process in general—described by one senior policy maker as 'waiting until the stars align'—suggests that the Indigenous media sector needs to be always on alert, ready to seize the moment when it emerges. Ideas, needs, strategies should be prepared well in advance of such policy moments if they are to have the slightest chance of being considered.

Since I first visited the outer islands of the Torres Strait more than 25 years ago there have been changes—and yet some things remain the same. Advances in communications technology have enabled Indigenous voices and images to reach local communities in languages that were initially threatened by the arrival of English language television. But have such innovations come too late? Generations of Indigenous children have grown up with images of non-Indigenous culture to inform their ideas and assumptions about their world. Can Indigenous television and radio possibly counter that? Despite all of the setbacks, I remain positive about the future of Indigenous media in Australia and beyond. A qualitative study of remote Indigenous television audiences I conducted with colleagues from Griffith University in 2007 revealed that Indigenous people place a high value on their own programming; seeing their own images (Meadows, 2010). By far the major role of Indigenous-produced media, according to their audiences, is education. It is the next generations who will benefit if we are able to get it right now.

Technological solutions can counter, to some extent, the dogged intransigence of the government policymaking process but it is in the resilience and creativity of the people that the real strength resides. It is this unmitigated ability to struggle against adversity born out of more than two centuries of oppression that has enabled Indigenous people to take on this challenge. I see no reason why this will not continue into the future for as long as it takes for communities to achieve genuine communication equality that, frustratingly, remains an elusive goal.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

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Michael Meadows worked as a journalist for 10 years before moving into Journalism Education in the late 1980s. His research interests include representations of Indigenous people and Indigenous media audiences, policy and practice. He has published numerous journal articles and three books: *Songlines to Satellites* (with Helen Molnar); *Voices in the Wilderness*, and *Developing Dialogues* (with Susan Forde and Kerrie Foxwell). He is an adjunct professor with the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research, Griffith University, in Brisbane.