Walking the talk: reflections on Indigenous media audience research methods

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Abstract

Anthropological research methods are characteristic of much of the investigation of remote Indigenous media production in Australia and have enabled the voices of some Indigenous audiences to be heard. However, these approaches generally have been concerned with the social organisation of production in remote communities with audiences seldom, if ever, the focus. This absence was one of the driving forces behind a qualitative study of audiences for Indigenous broadcasting in Australia on which this discussion is based. The article underlines the central place of audiences in media research and the importance of considering methodology as an integral part of the research process. It outlines the range of strategies and techniques used to gather data for the first comprehensive Australian study of audiences for Indigenous radio and television which confirmed the critical cultural role being played by these media in the face of continuing mainstream media stereotyping.

Introduction

The power and influence of mainstream media continues to transform the wider public sphere, compelling Indigenous people to seek access to their own media for political, educational, and cultural reasons. This global trend has been influenced by recognition of the potential for using media as tools for cultural and political intervention — effectively, allowing the dispossessed the capacity to speak as well as hear their own stories. This process has been driven by several impulses — combating mainstream stereotypes, addressing information gaps in non-Indigenous society, and reinforcing local community languages and cultures.

While in one sense this activity is at the periphery of mainstream conceptions of the public sphere, the implications are far more profound. Rather than adopting the idea of a single, all-encompassing public sphere, we need to think in terms of a series of the existence of parallel and overlapping public spheres — spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities of importance to them. Each of us simultaneously has membership of several different public spheres, moving between and within them according to desire and obligation. These multiple spheres of activity articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere where they are able to interact 'across lines of cultural diversity'. In this way, the varied forms of Indigenous media production that are active in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia have contributed significantly to the formation and maintenance of an Indigenous public sphere (Fraser 1993: 13; Avison and Meadows 2000; Meadows 2005).

A key influence on the quest by Indigenous people for empowerment at various levels — including media empowerment — is a continuing failure by the broader public sphere to account for Indigenous cultural needs. This has played a central role in the development of alternative media systems and alternative public spheres, including Indigenous public spheres. Audience reception has powerful political and cultural implications so it should not be surprising to find that Indigenous audiences respond in this way — but they have first to be invited to respond. At the same time as Indigenous voices remain suppressed in mainstream news coverage of events in which they are deeply implicated, Indigenous agency has been a crucial element of a global push for media access (Meadows 2001; Molnar and Meadows 2001). Drawing from her Native Canadian background and experience, Valaskakis (1993) echoes the experiences of many Indigenous peoples when she concludes:

> Today, we are all caught in a web of conflicting interests and actions, confrontations constructed in dominant cultural and political process and the Native experience of exclusion, or stereotypical inclusion and appropriation. For people of the First Nations, this involves the subaltern experience rooted in the lived reality and the representation of the 'insider', the 'outsider', and the 'other'.

She has coined the term, 'parallel voices', to illustrate the idea of separate universes inhabited by Indigenous and non-

Indigenous peoples sharing virtually the same spaces. The significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous media process, form and content is further evidence for their existence.

In this discussion, I want to canvass some of the ideas around Indigenous media that have begun to coalesce following recent audience research in Australia. The specific study from which I will draw included visits to 20 different regions and cities across the country, resulting in interviews and focus group discussions with a total of around 200 listeners to and viewers of Indigenous community radio and television programs (Meadows et al 2007). The research enabled greater understanding of not only the sector itself and its empowering potential, but also of the dominant media processes that are central to the formation and sustainability of the Indigenous public sphere and its interaction with the broader public sphere.

The audience study confirmed that diverse audiences access Indigenous broadcasting with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous listeners and viewers seeing these media as essential services. They play a central role in maintaining social networks with education of young people high on the list of priorities for both audiences and producers alike. Indigenous radio and television offer alternative sources of information about Indigenous affairs in contrast to the perceived stereotyped views that dominate mainstream media. Ironically, many see Indigenous media representations as breaking down such stereotypes because of the context — almost always absent from mainstream accounts — they are able to provide for their audiences. In this way, they are playing an important role in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. Audiences identify Indigenous radio and television as crucial media in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative industries, particularly music and dance, and highlight the critical cultural importance of this process. Analysis of audience responses gathered in the national study provides strong evidence to support suggestions of an absence of a barrier between audiences and producers of Indigenous media (Kulchyski 1989; Michaels 1990). This sets such media processes apart from the mainstream where the presence of such a barrier largely remains a defining characteristic of the media-audience relationship, with possible exceptions in aspects of the evolving online media environment (Reese et al 2007). Reconceptualising the nature of this relationship between Indigenous audiences and producers suggests a need for us to reflect on our own practices in engaging with Indigenous communities — hence this article.

The story so far

Much has been written and spoken about Indigenous media in terms of their structure and process but very little of this to date has included the widespread views of their audiences. Until relatively recently, the dominant body of knowledge related to Indigenous video production, in particular, has emerged from visual anthropology and has tended to privilege 'traditional' Indigenous communities in remote areas. This has been linked to ideas that the very nature of 'remoteness' brings with it an implied traditional purity where culture and languages are 'strong' (Molnar and Meadows 2001). It has nevertheless highlighted the importance of considering Indigenous media production in terms of the social relations of the communities in which they are produced. In the 1980s, Eric Michaels' work was influential in directing attention to the importance of cultural production in remote Indigenous communities in central Australia. Others have built on this thinking around the complex relationships between Indigenous people and their media (Ginsburg 1991; 1993; 2000; 2006; Deger 2007). However, such approaches generally have been concerned with the social organisation of production in *a particular* Indigenous community with *media audiences* seldom, if ever, the focus. No study thus far has sought to interrogate media audiences across a *range* of Indigenous cultural contexts. This absence was one of the driving forces behind the qualitative study on which I will draw for this discussion.

Others have looked at Indigenous media production beyond the remote communities, acknowledging a more diverse notion of pan-Indigenous identity by applying broad cultural studies and media perspectives (Meadows 1993; Meadows and Molnar 2002). This approach considered Indigenous media activity wherever it was being produced, heeding advice from a chorus of perceptive critics, quick to point out the 'social scientists' great deception' of assuming that remoteness by itself somehow bestows on communities a 'purity' in terms of their appropriateness as sites for research (Langton 1981; 1993). The focus on remote Indigenous media production has generally also tended to give language a powerful authorising role. While this is most certainly the case for many communities — particular in remote communities where English might be a second, third or fourth language — there is a danger in assuming language per se is an essential marker of Indigenousness. This is especially so in places like Australia, Canada and the United States where the majority of First Nations' peoples live in urban centres where they do not — or cannot — speak their original languages. Martin-Barbero (1988: 459) reminds us of the long-standing populist-romantic links between the 'the indigenous', 'the original', and 'the primitive' which made the idea of Indigenous irreconcilable with modernity, concluding that 'the indigenous was thus identified with a kind of pre-reality, static, without development'. And while this realisation has generally influenced recent research efforts in Indigenous

Australia, mainstream media representations of Indigenous people remain locked within narrow frames of reference, almost always negative and usually associated with anti-social activities (Jakubowicz and Seneviratne 1996; Hippocrates et al 1996; Meadows 2001; Ang et al 2002: 8). Nevertheless, a growing archive of research from around the world suggest that Indigenous media produced in remote, regional and urban environments have the capacity not only to offer alternative ideas and assumptions about the world that enable their audiences to make sense of their places within it, but also to offer a critique of mainstream media processes (Roth and Valaskakis 1989: 233; Meadows 1993; 2001; Rankine and McCreanor 2004; Wilson and Stewart 2008). Valaskakis (1993) offers this assessment of the power of locally-produced radio and television programs and the broader implications for Indigenous communities that flow from this:

> Like the terrain of social struggle in which it is articulated, identity is continually contested and reconstructed. It is built and re-built in the discursive negotiation of complex alliances and relations within the heterogeneity of community; in discourse which is based not in unity or belonging, but in transformation and difference. Within this understanding, representations and cultural narratives are central sites of cultural struggle.

Australian Indigenous anthropologist Marcia Langton, too, has underlined the importance of media in the formation of identity and suggests three ways in which this process occurs: through Indigenous people seeing themselves in terms of their kinship relations; through observations by *non-Indigenous* people who have no real contact with the Indigenous world (producing the prevailing mainstream media stereotypes); and a third, more dynamic notion which emerges from a *dialogue* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This last shared concept of identity, argues Langton, is the most useful because it is sustainable and relates more closely to the dynamic nature of culture (Langton 1993). In their work with the Indigenous peoples of Scandinavia — the Sami — Pietikäinen and Dufva (2006) allude to similar notions of identity, albeit considering language as 'an essential marker' in this process. For some Sami, this is undoubtedly the case. However, in a later study, Pietikäinen qualifies this in terms of those who do not speak one of the 10 Sami languages, all of which are endangered (2008: 175). In Indigenous Australia, fewer than 20 of the estimated 250 languages spoken at the time of European invasion are *not* endangered (Nathan 2008). For the vast majority of Indigenous people who now live in urban and regional Australia, language may not be an essential marker in determining identity although affiliation with a linguistic-cultural community most certainly is — and this is why media are valuable cultural resources for such communities. Indigenous people in Australia and elsewhere see *their* media playing a central role in their own cultural survival. Media are tools with the potential to make this the core of their activities (Lui 1994). Indigenous preference for broadcast media is a global phenomenon because of the accessibility and affinity of these — and their related forms — with the predominantly oral nature of Indigenous cultures (Meadows 1993; Kauranan and Tuori 2001; Mushengyenzi 2003; Brigido-Corachan 2004).

The existence and persistence of a barrier between media audiences and producers remains a defining characteristic of mainstream media despite the interactive potential of new media forms (Reese et al 2007). Following experiments with the ways in which the Navajo 'invented' their own form of visual communication when given a movie camera (Worth and Adair 1973), Michaels (1986) extended this a decade later by asking the Warlpiri at Yuendumu to 'invent' their own video. Following his years spent working with the community in central Australia, observing — and sometimes participating in — their video production processes, Michaels (1990: 25) suggested there was evidence for a 'Brechtian violation of the producer/audience boundary' in Indigenous video production. Around the same time, Canadian sociologist Peter Kulchyski (1989) argued that a lack of 'performers' on Inuit-produced television in the arctic supported something similar. Others have alluded to this but it has not been systematically explored until now (Barclay 1990; Meadows, 1993; Mushengyezi 2003; Hemple 2004; Spitulnik 2004). The audience commentaries I draw from in this article offer strong support for the idea that a significant weakening — or even absence—of this barrier between audiences and producers is a key characteristic of Indigenous media in relation to both mainstream and other forms of 'community' radio and television. The important new dimension here is that this relationship is not confined to Indigenous media audiences and producers in remote locations — it is a particular characteristic of the processes of Indigenous radio and television production, where it is firmly community-based. I suggest that this is a defining characteristic of Indigenous media and can be interpreted as a rejection of 'Western conceptual tools' and the 'conventions and formats of the majority culture' (Smith 2004: 106-107). This process is central to the operation of an Indigenous public sphere which is in a unique position to engage with the broader public sphere (Meadows 2005).

In this article, I will outline the challenging processes involved in designing and implementing a research project that attempted to take into account the particular nature of Indigenous media and the cultural contexts in which they are produced. My aim is to offer some observations on the relationship between specific media processes, forms and appropriate audience research design and methods but first, a snapshot of the Indigenous broadcasting sector in Australia.

Indigenous radio and television

More than 100 licensed Indigenous radio and television stations serve their audiences in remote parts of Australia with a further 25 radio stations in regional and urban areas (AICA 2008). Most of the small, remote stations are engaged in re-transmitting available satellite programming, both mainstream- and community-produced, with a handful having access to sufficient resources to enable local production. There is one Indigenous commercial radio station and one commercial television station, Imparja, based in Alice Springs in central Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have won access to the airwaves only following persistent campaigns. Most major urban and regional areas now have an Indigenous broadcaster complementing existing media. In addition to the community stations, there are two Indigenous radio networks—the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and the National Indigenous News Service (NINS)—and a National Indigenous Television service (NITV) (Molnar and Meadows 2001).

Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) began broadcasting on a spare available Imparja satellite channel to remote Indigenous communities in central Australia in 2001. This innovative service evolved from the first experiments with local video in communities at Pukutja (Ernabella) and Yuendumu in central Australia in the early 1980s. Like its predecessors, ICTV featured close to 100 percent Indigenous content, produced mostly by small bush communities and mostly in local or regional languages without subtitles. The service featured video material—educational material for children, current affairs, music video clips, sporting activities, community service announcements etc—produced by remote Indigenous media associations, including Pitjantjatjara-Yunkantjatjara (PY) Media, Warlpiri Media, Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM), Ngaanyatjarra Media, Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasters' Association (TEABBA) and other local producers. A federal government review of Indigenous television options in 2005 resulted in a policy change which saw ICTV eventually replaced by National Indigenous Television (NITV), which began broadcasting in July 2007 (NITV 2008). The transition was controversial with bush communities arguing that a service they initiated had been 'taken over' by virtue of a federal government policy direction. Another problem is that most Australians cannot receive the new Indigenous television service because it is available only on a community free-to-air television channel in remote areas or pay TV in regional and urban areas. In June 2007, around twenty-four per cent of Australian households subscribed to pay TV (Australian Film Commission 2008: 8). Although the former ICTV communities were given some access to the new national channel in 2008, the transition process has come in for significant criticism (Rijavec 2007).

Developing appropriate research methods

In an earlier section, I referred to research approaches implicating Indigenous media adopted primarily by scholars with links to visual anthropology — ethnography, participant-observation etc — but which have been almost exclusively confined to a particular remote community. The aim of the *Community Media Matters* project (Meadows et al 2007) was to canvass a range of views that were more representative of the diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures. The approach developed in several ways. Essentially, it melded prior research experiences and methods with local variations developed in consultation with Indigenous research colleagues. This included using a combination of 'key-people' interviews to help to identify appropriate people and issues, followed by a process of being 'referred on' by interviewees to others. This, coupled with 'chance meeting' interviews at various locations, provided a methodological melange to suit the culturally diverse and dispersed Indigenous communities involved although I acknowledge the well-documented problematic nature of cross-cultural research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Brady 1981; von Sturmer 1981; Lyons 1981; 1983; Eades 1985; Michaels 1985; 1990; Meadows 1993; Meadows and van Vuuren 1998; Roy Morgan Research 2005; Knight 2005).

From the time I undertook the first detailed studies of Indigenous media audiences in the Torres Strait, it was clear that particular research methods were more effective than others (Meadows 1988; 1993). I learned then of the importance of merging as much as possible with local community timetables rather than expecting people to drop everything and attend a focus group at an appointed time, for example. I also quickly realised the importance of simply 'being seen' — particularly in a small community — before undertaking any research activity. The critical importance of being 'authorised' by a community became apparent. This is akin to the approach adopted by Galarrwuy Yunupingu in a media awareness program he organised in Arnhem Land in the mid 1990s where participating journalists had to take off their watches and simply observe — and be observed — for 24 hours before asking any questions (Hartley and McKee 1996). But even after careful initial interaction, the questions for Indigenous people remain: Why should we talk to you? What benefits do we gain in return? It underlined a fundamental issue still of concern to Indigenous communities in Australia who are justified

in asking: 'Are you just *another* researcher wanting to take our intellectual property without consideration of some form of exchange?' This was very evident in early responses to the study.

Part of the methodology employed was an invitation for audiences of the popular Indigenous-produced community radio call-in program, *Talk Black*, to comment on either the program or Indigenous media in general. Over a five-day period, three of 20 callers to the radio station — Bumma Bippera Media in Cairns — questioned the research, with one observing, 'I'd like to know how the government will use this information'. Another asked, 'Would the voices put on the survey be voices that favour the government?' (*Talk Black* 2005). Although the remaining callers to the program offered positive observations, the suspicion voiced by these callers is reflective of broader Indigenous community views. Although I was aware of this before we started the project, it was clear that we would have to build into our methodology ways of countering such perceptions. Indigenous communities expect much more engagement by researchers at the level of the local so that information is 'given' rather than 'taken'. Michaels (1985) has outlined the dangers involved when a researcher's interviewees say what they think the researcher wants to hear. Of course, this can never be entirely eliminated as a possibility in any research involving interviews. However, I suggest that deep engagement with participants' cultural environments might be one way of at least minimising this undesirable outcome. This was the basic principle adopted in approaching the study. In accord with the usual research protocols, participants' anonymity was promised and preserved.

Ang (2006: 195) draws from Meaghan Morris when she argues for 'an open-ended dialogue between professionals and their stakeholders' in contextualising the processes of cultural research. In the same vein, Gillard (2000: 125) has underlined the importance and potency of 'careful fieldwork which incorporates the perspectives of those studied'. She acknowledges the importance of qualitative methods — observation, interviews and focus groups — in producing 'detailed accounts' of how audiences 'construct their own meaning and cultural activity within a particular site'. The application of qualitative methods seemed the most appropriate to enable exploration of these and other issues (Searle et al 2004). Although this may be well-known to some involved in ethnography and other such methodologies *in theory*, the continuing criticisms of researchers' lack of engagement with Indigenous communities suggests that this does not easily translate into research *practice*. It is an important element that was inherent in our research design as it developed.

But how to identify the audiences involved?

To enable the best possible access to a wide range of Indigenous people who listened to community radio or who watched local television, we opted for a range of familiar methods and approaches — participant observation; key people, chance meeting and 'referral-on' interviews; and focus group discussions. We employed a senior Indigenous researcher and local Indigenous community representatives — most often, media producers —as on-the-ground facilitators. This array of Indigenous research participants played a central role, 'authorising' our presence in the community and ensuring our behaviour there was in line with local cultural protocols.

We chose focus groups as one of our research methods for the broader sector-wide community broadcasting audience study because of its ability to enlist 'group interaction to generate data' (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999: 4) and it seemed to be an appropriate tool for use in selected locations for the Indigenous component of the project. One defining feature of focus group research is its rejection of 'statistical representativeness' in favour of a 'theoretical sample' (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which aims 'to generate talk that will extend the range of thinking about an issue' and thus recruits 'groups that are defined in relation to the particular conceptual framework of the study' (McNaughten and Myers 2004: 68). This was precisely what we were seeking despite the potential for bias that inevitably accompanies all qualitative research (Forde et al. 2006).

We conducted eight Indigenous community radio audience focus group discussions in major urban centres around Australia with just failing to attract the six to 10 people we set as our goal (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999: 8). We used the stations themselves as the vehicle for inviting listeners to call a toll-free number (or the station) to register their interest. Where there were more than ten respondents, we chose participants at random. Our project manager then called each one twice—the second time on the day before the focus group meeting—encouraging them to attend. We held all focus group meetings in a room at the local community station, providing a light refreshments. Although for some participants, it was the first time they had visited the premises, most were familiar with their local stations at one level or another. As expected, most were either related to, knew, or had known somebody who worked at the station. We made it clear that any current media workers were ineligible to participate in focus groups. In several of the focus groups, former station workers were present. We had expected this, given the tightly-knit nature of Indigenous communities—because of their small size and extended kinship systems—and the suspected close relationship between producers and audiences. In all focus groups,

we initially invited participants to outline why they had agreed to participate. We listed the issues each one raised and then systematically worked through them, asking the group to elaborate on them and to provide examples where possible. This effectively enabled each focus group to set its own agenda, acknowledged as a more collaborative and empowering approach for research participants (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999: 4, 11; Catterall and MacLaran 1997; Criterion Research 2002). We had our own set of questions but on all occasions, focus groups answered these through the spontaneous nomination of what *they* perceived to be the important issues.

The presence of Indigenous research assistants clearly put face-to-face interviewees at ease and although I acknowledge the problematic nature of any kind of cross-cultural research, I believe that this approach facilitated a significant level of reliability. It ensured we were provided with introductions to a range of community members, in a way that 'authorised' our presence. It also meant the local community received something back—i.e. a wage for a community member to assist with the project and the associated work experience gained. Indeed, in the few communities where we were unable to locate a local research assistant to vouch for us in the community and to assure community members that we could be 'trusted', it was very difficult to collect substantial data.

In all of the communities we visited, the local research assistants we employed were already known personally to both Indigenous research assistant Derek Flucker and myself — as the primary researchers — either through our existing networks or new links we had made through our attendance at a wide range of events prior to starting our fieldwork. The extended kinship structure and efficient networking that is a central element of Indigenous social organisation meant that Derek invariably ran into relatives and friends in the most unexpected places. Regardless, whenever we approached 'strangers', Indigenous people we met would invariably speak to him, first of all. I suggest that this initial introduction phase is perhaps the most critical element of the cross cultural research process, particularly when using a 'chance meeting' approach as we did for most remote community visits. It is a moment when people decide to become participants or not. The mere presence of another Indigenous person — and better still, someone familiar — 'authorises' the relationship, in a way, and a dialogue can begin. I cannot underline the importance of this element of our approach enough. Establishing such relationships were integral to the success of the project and without this kind of invaluable cultural knowledge and Indigenous input, it is doubtful if any significant and reliable audience data could have been gathered.

Although none of the methods I have outlined here is new, it was the first time that all have been used variously in a single project — and specifically for Indigenous audience research. But perhaps the key additional element which sets this research methodology apart from its predecessors is the ways in which Indigenous perspectives were incorporated into the research design process. This involved an active engagement with representatives of the two key national Indigenous media industry groups — the Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA) and the Indigenous Remote Communication Association (IRCA). Both were represented on the project's advisory committee which met regularly both face-to-face and via teleconferences for the almost three year duration of the project although our collective relationships with them extended back for more than a decade. They participated in negotiations over the research design and implementation through committee and personal discussion based on their intimate knowledge of the Indigenous media sector and its processes. Applying their own knowledge and networking skills, they facilitated meetings between members of the research team and Indigenous community representatives in a variety of settings at local, regional and national levels. This helped to establish the broad context for the research as well as introducing us to key people who would later 'authorise' our presence during field visits. Negotiations over which communities to incluide to ensure a representative 'mix' of Indigenous media processes, forms and audiences took around 18 months to complete. This was *the* major issue to resolve with our Indigenous partners before we could undertake our first interviews. In some cases, it meant multiple visits to proposed communities to discuss the project and its relevance with local representatives before being invited to return to conduct fieldwork. Under the protocols we had discussed and agreed upon with our Indigenous partners, without invitations, the community visits could not take place.

The need for achieving balance in the researcher-participant relationship alerted us to identifying opportunities where some kind of reciprocity might be possible. For example, conversations at an Indigenous telecommunications conference held in Alice Springs early in the project revealed concern about how to deal with a new scheme which demanded that Indigenous communities agree to meet federal government benchmarks before funding for a variety of community-based programs was forthcoming. Drawing on his own experience in the area, Derek was able to offer strategic advice and to provide resources to several of the community organisations involved. In other cases, we were able to provide advice on education options for media workers and resources related to media policy development processes. In addition, all participating media organisations received their own detailed, audience research summary. It meant that our contributions in some cases extended well beyond the research project time frame. Through such activities, we were able to begin

work on returning the trust Indigenous communities (and others) had placed in us by 'giving' us the information we sought.

Once we had reached agreement over which communities and broadcasting outlets to include, over the next eight months, we visited 20 different regions around Australia, conducting focus group discussions in Melbourne, Cairns, Alice Springs, Port Augusta, Darwin, Brisbane and Broome. In addition, we conducted face-to-face interviews with listeners and viewers of Indigenous programming, primarily but not exclusively during cultural festivals at Gulkula, Maningrida and Yuendumu (Northern Territory), Laura (Cape York), Thursday Island (Torres Strait), Umuwa (South Australia) and Townsville (North Queensland). We chose these events because people who attend them are more relaxed and were more willing to discuss their perceptions of local media. Previous research experience suggested that this was a more appropriate and successful approach (Meadows 1988; Meadows and van Vuuren 1998). At each location, we worked with local Indigenous community members we knew, who could then introduce us to people — many of whom they knew — explaining the reason for the project and gaining informed consent for an interview or short discussion. In several of the communities we visited, one of us was interviewed on local radio — an effective way of introducing us to the community, explaining what the project was about, and effectively 'authorising' our visits. In remote communities, chance meetings and referral-on interviews worked best.

On Palm Island in far North Queensland, for example, a local Indigenous research assistant and I waited outside the island's only — and very busy — general store and spoke to people there at random. Back in Townsville — a 20 minute local flight away — we interviewed people visiting the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health service. Such places are centres of community activity. The small populations of the remote communities we visited, coupled with the kinship systems that link vast networks of Indigenous people, meant that the majority of our interviewees were known to our local research assistants. Indeed, it was this very relationship that facilitated access for us. Because of the prior relationships we had established with our on-the-ground facilitators, each had a clear understanding of our objective to obtain as many interviews as possible within the limited time frame of our visits. At the Indigenous communities of Beagle Bay and Djaridjin in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, we combined chance meeting interviews with a referral-on method, in several instances going from house to house with a local Indigenous media producer as our community 'guide'. Our visit to Yuendumu was effectively managed by a highly qualified local Indigenous researcher who ensured we spoke to the appropriate people — and in the correct order. This pattern was common in the remote communities we visited where those with higher community status — the chairperson and elders — were almost always the first to be approached. At the cultural and music festivals we visited, specifically to talk to remote community audiences, local research assistants we employed introduced us to people at random as they walked or drove past. In the remote locations, our local research assistants would generally introduce us to a potential interviewee following a short conversation explaining the project — sometimes in a local language — and would then quietly walk away to find another 'candidate' as the interview began.

With participants' permission, we recorded all interviews, focus group discussions and talkback radio callers, then transcribing them for more detailed analysis. All recorded material was analysed using the qualitative software program, NVIVO, which facilitated a grounded theory approach by identifying key themes that emerged from the data.

The melange of methods employed here enabled us to explore some audience perceptions of Indigenous media in a diverse range of locations. We applied particular methods to suit particular cultural contexts. For example, it is doubtful whether focus group research would have been successful in remote communities for several reasons: community perceptions of 'research fatigue'; a low priority placed on research in relation to the social and cultural obligations of everyday life; and difficulties in managing the complex kinship taboos that define Indigenous identity. In our Broome focus group, for example, I noticed a young man move to another seat around the table when an older woman returned to the room after a short break, sitting in a different seat much closer to him. He explained that it was his mother-in-law and he was forbidden under local clan protocols to have any communication or contact with her. She agreed, explaining that in some communities, the two of them would not be allowed to be in the same room together but in Broome, this strict interpretation of the taboo was not generally enforced. Although both contributed to the discussion without any apparent difficulty, they studiously avoided eye contact for the two-hour meeting. It emerged during the discussion that one extended family made up the bulk of participants in that focus group. The diverse nature of Indigenous cultures demanded a methodological approach that was flexible enough to take this reality of the everyday into account.

Our decision to work closely with Indigenous media industry representatives — and Indigenous research assistants at various levels — in designing and implementing the methodology was crucial to its success. It may well be that despite our best efforts, some of our participants did tell us what we wanted to hear. However, the analysis of audiences' responses across the continent suggested a significant degree of reliability in the methods and approaches adopted. This was

particularly evident in common themes that emerged. Of course, the analysis revealed some significant differences in responses, particularly between remote and urban communities — discussed in more detail in the project's final report — but these ostensibly disparate Indigenous audiences still have much in common. The study confirmed the central place being played in everyday community life by Indigenous radio and television across Australia. It is clear that a wide range of audiences access Indigenous broadcasting with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous listeners and viewers identifying the following common themes across Australia:

· Indigenous media offer an essential service to communities and play a central organising role in community life;

· Indigenous media help people and communities to maintain social networks;

· Indigenous media are playing a strong educative role in communities, particularly for young people;

· They offer an alternative source of news and information about the community which avoids stereotyping of Indigenous people and issues;

· They are helping to break down stereotypes about Indigenous people for the non-Indigenous community, thus playing an important role in cross-cultural dialogue; and

· Indigenous-produced radio and television offer a crucial medium for specialist music and dance.

A more detailed discussion of the project findings, along with extensive quoted commentary from audience focus groups and interviews, is in the final report, *Community Media Matters*, available as a free PDF download at http://www.cbonline.org.au/index.cfm?pageId=51,0,1,0 .

Conclusion

The methods we adopted for this audience study were shaped by the very nature of Indigenous media themselves. The long lead time before fieldwork began enabled consideration of the cultural contexts in which Indigenous media producers and their audiences interact. This necessitated the application of a flexible qualitative methodology that enabled exploration of the 'hard surfaces' — the 'supports, vehicles and mechanisms' (Mercer 1989: 13) — of Indigenous media production and reception by taking into account the 'political, economic and stratificatory realities' involved (Geertz 1973: 30). In many ways, what we were seeking was a conversation with audiences about Indigenous media. Given the constraints that limit all research endeavours — particularly cross cultural encounters — I suggest that our approach was able to minimise the inevitable challenges. The overt and highly visible involvement of Indigenous people in the research process at all levels was the major reason, I suggest, for its success.

The data produced by this study supports the assertion that Indigenous media in Australia and elsewhere are playing a significant empowering role for individuals, social groups and the processes that create 'communities'. Despite enabling spaces for Indigenous people to 'connect' and sustain each other, there is scant evidence that Indigenous radio and television production in Australia is producing division in the broader public sphere — in fact, quite the contrary. Perhaps by virtue of its diverse nature, Indigenous community broadcasting is quietly contributing to the idea of active citizenry and enhancing the democratic process. In the light of continuing misrepresentation of Indigenous communities and issues in mainstream media, this aspect of Australian creative, social and political endeavour takes on an especially important cultural role.

Indigenous communication systems existed on the Australian continent for millennia before white invasion. Since then, the power and influence of non-Aboriginal media have had an overwhelming influence on shaping dominant ideas and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their place in the broader public sphere. It is a framework which either limits or excludes Indigenous voices from public sphere discussion about issues of crucial importance to all of us. It is primarily for this reason that Indigenous people around the world continue to seek access to — and to produce — their own media. And it is clear that Indigenous audiences are deeply embedded in this process. If this study achieves nothing else, it underlines the central place of audiences in media research. But I suggest, too, that it demonstrates the importance of understanding research methodology — through contextualised design and implementation — as an integral part of the process. Community information and communication technologies (ICTs) — radio and television in this case — facilitate *existing* community needs, a process eloquently summarized by Ramirez (2001: 327):

> A community defines what it wants to be, where it wants to go, and ICTs are tools to be harnessed towards those agreements. ICTs are part of a context, along with global markets, jobs, interest rates, tariffs, regulations, political parties, families, weather, and disease. They can be harnessed and put to work to reaffirm where a community

wants to be. What is true, however, is that they create a new environment that was not there before…

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