**Will it harm the sheep? Developments and disputes in central Australian indigenous media**

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There’s a famous story from half a century ago that Sol Worth and Jon Adair tell about their negotiations with a Navajo elder, Sam Yazzie, to enable them to make films with Navaho people in the US:

Adair explained that we wanted to teach some Navaho to make movies […] When Adair finished Sam [Yazzie] thought for a while, and then turned to Worth and asked a lengthy question which was interpreted as, “Will making movies do the sheep any harm?” Worth was happy to explain that as far as he knew, there was no chance that making movies would harm the sheep. Sam thought this over and then asked, “Will making movies do the sheep good?” Worth was forced to reply that as far as he knew making movies wouldn’t do the sheep any good. Sam thought this over for a moment, then, looking round at us he said, “Then why make movies?” (Worth & Adair 1972: 5)

Yazzie’s question ‘why make movies?’ is intriguing because it makes us ask: are there real benefits that media use brings to indigenous communities? And perhaps, by implication, does this work bring more benefits to its champions in the over-developed world - people like myself and maybe some readers of this book - than it does to indigenous populations? These questions preoccupied me during a research trip to Alice Springs in Central Australia I made in October/November 2011. My aim had been to follow up a Channel 4 programme – *Satellite Dreaming* (CAAMA Productions 1991) – which I was involved in making 20 years previously as a co-production with the indigenous media organisation CAAMA (the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association). I was interested to find out what developments and changes had happened in the intervening years, and to see what lessons those changes might hold for those of us interested in alternative and indigenous people’s media now.

Twenty years ago the answers to both my questions seemed very clear to me ( ‘yes’ and ‘no’ respectively), but since then there have been a number of insightful critiques of indigenous peoples’ media, some of which I’ll cite later in relation to the Central Australian experience. I’ll mention just two now. Just over 20 years ago Rachel Moore questioned the way in which academic Visual Anthropologists celebrated indigenous videos for the ‘rock solid fact of their authenticity’ (Moore 1992: 128), suggesting that ‘in its first world reception’ this work becomes ‘one long performance’ of the defining contact myth ‘between primitive and civilised’(132). She was talking about the reception of this cultural work in anacademic context – as was Toby Miller, who wrote about the way in which ‘Aborigines have been the most important exporters of social theory and cultural production to the northern hemisphere over the past century’ (Miller 1995: 7). He satirizes the ‘lengthy history of First World people writing about tribal Aboriginal forms of life and then exporting them back home, with a subsequent elevation of status for themselves and a renewal of critique for Academic theorisation’ (14) – a useful caution for me as I write this now.

*Satellite Dreaming* was shown in 1993 on both the ABC in Australia, and Channel 4 in the UK - in the UK as part of a series of programmes, with an accompanying book called *Channels of Resistance* (Dowmunt 1993)*. Satellite Dreaming* began with a sequence depicting the launch of AUSSAT - the satellite system which was to deliver phone and TV signals to the remote Australian outback – followed by a graphic representation of an indigenous man protecting the centre of the continent from the satellite signal with a traditional wooden shield, then a sequence depicting indigenous video production and playback in the desert.Our intentions are probably clear from this sequence of images, a depiction of modern technology meeting traditional aboriginal life in the outback (our version, perhaps, of the ‘contact myth’ that Moore describes), and then of traditional culture fighting back against the technology, resisting the media invasion with their own productions. This ‘resistance' model – indigenous people resisting media invasion - is one of the binaristic simplification that I’ve come to question since making *Satellite Dreaming*.

What took me to Central Australia 20 years ago to make this programme - and then what drew me back again at the end of last year? My interest was first stimulated in the mid-1980s when I first heard about CAAMA winning - against all the odds - the license to run a TV station for the whole Central Australian footprint which the AUSSAT system covered. This was real David and Goliath stuff - all the more inspiring for a media activist like myself in mid-1980s Thatcherite Britain (a few years after the Falklands War, the Miners' defeat, the abolition of the GLC and other socialist Metropolitan councils). It was obvious that the alternative media project in the UK was unlikely to get much purchase in the mainstream media world in that particular political climate, but out there in Central Australia it seemed a small and marginalised group was doing just that.

I went to Alice Springs for the first time in 1986, mainly to meet up with Philip Batty – a ‘whitefella’ who had co-founded CAAMA a few years earlier with his Aboriginal colleague John Macumba. Philip was the person perhaps most responsible for winning CAAMA the license. He had started his work as a media activist in the late 1970s in Papunya. After moving to Alice Springs and working on the first radio programme for aboriginal people with John Macumba, they set up CAAMA - which originally they had wanted, in the sprit of the times, to call something like the 'black revolutionary media organisation' (Batty 2011).

While still in Papunya, Philip had become aware of the AUSSAT satellite project. The government’s plan was to cover the continent with 3 satellites to provide TV and phone signals in even the most remote areas – the areas where large numbers of aboriginal people still led more 'traditional' lives, and where many indigenous languages were still spoken. A delegation from Canberra had come to Papunya to do a consultation exercise on the introduction of these new media technologies into remote desert communities, which bewildered the local people - not least because, Philip pointed out, most of them didn't understand English (2011).

The anthropologist Eric Michaels had also started to work at Yuendumu (a settlement 293 km northwest of Alice Springs) a few years after this, with an anthropological brief to investigate the potential effects of the satellite on Aboriginal communities - which he then departed substantially from. In partnership with Francis Juppurula Kelly, a local Warlpiri man, and under the direction of a local committee of elders, he established Warlpiri Media, ‘to get protection for Aboriginal people’, as Kelly has since described it: ‘We are lucky we started Warlpiri Media in this community, if not we could have lost our culture and language’ (1988). The ‘protection’ they provided was local programming, initially shown in the community via a pirate TV transmitter. Eric Michaels suggested the work was a response to

the problem of social diversity that introduced media pose for indigenous peoples everywhere: how to respond to the insistent pressure towards standardization, the homogenizing tendencies of contemporary world culture? **(**Michaels 2004: 100)

Michaels’ question was being asked by a large number of people in Central Australia in response to AUSSAT, and fairly rapidly in the early 1980s a campaign developed - led by CAAMA but with the participation of Ernabella Video Television (now PY Media), and Warlpiri Media, both of whom were already running pirate TV stations for cultural maintenance and 'protection'. This work was amongst that described by Faye Ginsburg in an influential article published in 1991, where she argued that 'indigenous and minority people have been using a variety of media [...] as new vehicles for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination' (Ginsburg 1991: 32).

The campaign culminated in CAAMA bidding for the license to run the AUSSAT Central Australian footprint, at a public government tribunal in Alice Springs. They were successful, after a long fight.

Freda Glynn, an aboriginal woman who was at that time running CAAMA with Philip Batty, had made the case to the Tribunal by talking about 'the emergency that has arisen with Aboriginal people' (Bell 2008: 257) – which included many of the young people in remote communities who were self-harming and glue sniffing. She suggested that satellite television was 'the third wave': first was the invasion by Europeans , then the introduction of alcohol into the communities and now television: 'we may be able to use it or it may destroy that very strong culture in the communities' (Bell 2008: 154). Glynn and others saw this perceived threat of ‘culture-cide’ by the satellite broadcasting - its potentially destructive social effects on communities, and on indigenous languages – as being best countered by indigenous media: vehicles for ‘self-determination’, and for ‘resistance’ to outside cultural domination - in Faye Ginsburg's language. As it turned out Imparja TV - the station that was established by CAAMA as a result of winning the license - was a failure in terms of CAAMA’s (or more exactly Philip and Freda’s) ambitions for it – a long story, but principally because it was forced to compete in the marketplace as a commercial broadcasting organisation, with the result that it produced very little of the Aboriginal programming that was promised in its license application – a story we told in *Satellite Dreaming*, showing how Aboriginal programming didn't generate sufficient advertising revenue to 'justify' its costs. In the end, Philip was forced out of CAAMA, along with Freda, primarily because they disagreed with the governing Board (of CAAMA and Imaparja) about the commercial direction Imparja TV was travelling in.

In the years since then, Philip has developed an analysis of this history in which he tried to go beyond the ‘resistance’ model. For instance, he critiqued a sentence in the introduction to Channels of Resistance, where I wrote about how groups all over the world were beginning to resist ‘dominant television forms’ (Dowmunt 1993:14). He responded:

[…] there is little point in deploying crude binary logic in analyzing these exceedingly complex events in terms off a contest between the dominated and the dominant. Rather, there were numerous points of resistance dispersed across a broad field of activity … (Batty 2001: 1)

He later elaborated his critique of the resistance model in his PhD thesis – which strove to understand the role of the state in determining what had gone wrong with Imparja:

[…]in failing to address the problematic relationship between the development of Aboriginal broadcasting and government, many of these writers not only demonstrate a certain naïveté about the state's project of 'Aboriginal self-determination', but take an intellectually barren approach in its analysis. […] Here, the government is simply seen as part of the 'natural' social and political order in which these developments occurred. Furthermore, the propensity to render invisible the role of government in the development of Aboriginal broadcasting is […] directly connected to the narrowly-defined ideologies that underpin such work. (Batty 2003: 16-17)

The project of 'Aboriginal self-determination' to which Batty refers here began in the early 1970s, partly in response to demands from Aboriginal activists that the Federal Government give them the right to administer their own communities. The Government agreed, and appointed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to allocate and distribute funds to Aboriginal communities and to liaise with the Federal Government in relation to funding policies. So the project from the start was heavily enmeshed in state power. Batty goes on to suggest that what he calls the ‘selves deployed by ‘self-determination’ were themselves shaped by state power:

Throughout the era of Aboriginal ‘self-determination’ […] the state has sought to constitute a range of differing Aboriginal 'selves'. […] Perhaps the most ambiguous feature of the Aboriginal self-determinationist project has been its desire to constitute - in certain contexts - what I will describe as a 'resistant Aboriginal self'. Here I will focus on the 'culturally authentic' and 'resistant' Aboriginal 'self', since their formation was of central importance in the formation of an Aboriginal agency capable of establishing an Aboriginal broadcasting service.

(Batty 2003: 42)

So he saw the policy of self-determination much more as a project of the state than of autonomous, ‘self-determined’ action by the Aboriginal community, and argued that the state was integrally involved in the mobilisation of the various Aboriginal 'selves' that served their policy needs. He concludes that:

the 'culturally authentic' and 'resistant' Aboriginal 'self', […] was of central importance in the formation of an Aboriginal agency capable of establishing an Aboriginal broadcasting service. (Batty 2003: 42)

Batty critiqued Eric Michaels’ work, most vigorously for his perceived championing of the 'culturally authentic' Aboriginal 'self' - in effect, for having too simple, even an essentialist view of traditional Aboriginal communities. The widespread critiquing of Michaels’ work started soon after his death, in a special issue of Continuum (O’Regan 1990) in which, for instance, Tim Rowse suggests that Michaels was too committed to the notion of ‘communicating community’ in a situation in which ‘community as such may not exist as a unified entity’(1990: 115), and Robert Hodge accuses his work of expressing ‘a ghostly survival of Aboriginalism’ [akin to Said’s ‘Orientalism’] in [his] own core premises’(1990: 141).

More recently, Melinda Hinkson has written that Michaels’ focus on the uses of video and television for ‘cultural maintenance’ fostered a ‘false dichotomy […] between traditional and modern, culture and lifestyle and indeed local and global – that assumes cultural production to be a static process’(2002: 205). Her view is that this focus enabled him to ignore the fundamentally ‘inter-cultural’ (213) nature of his media work in Yuendumu, disregarding his own role as a European in an encounter with his Aboriginal collaborators. Finally Jennifer Deger makes the point that ‘the kind of cultural future envisioned by Michaels […] is, in a profound sense, his own’ (2006: 41). She suggests that ‘the defiant tone that infuses these [Michaels’ and others’] accounts of indigenous empowerment through technology has proven to have a widespread and […] somewhat romantic appeal’ (47).

I appreciate the weight of some of the criticisms leveled against Michaels, as I’m conscious that I am someone who was also thoroughly seduced by this ‘romantic appeal’ in the 1980s and 1990s – and that it provided some of my motivation for wanting to return to Australia recently. In the intervening years I'd kept in touch with what was happening in Central Australia, including following the progress of Warwick Thornton’s first featurefilm *Samson and Delilah,* which he shot and directed and which won the Camera d'Or (best first feature) at the Cannes Film Festival, 2009. 20 years ago Warwick was 19, an Aboriginal trainee at CAAMA and the cameraman on *Satellite Dreaming.* In *Samson and Delilah* (2009), Thornton used his own experience as a young Aboriginal man growing up in and around Alice Springs to inform the story of his two young lovers and their harsh encounters with their own culture, and with white Australia. It is a film that, despite an apparently optimistic ending, presents as bleak a picture of life for young Aboriginal people as Freda Glynn had at the AUSSAT tribunal over 20 years before. However it does end with the two protagonists apparently trying to re-forge their lives on an ‘outstation’ in the remote landscape of Delilah’s family’s ‘country’ – a way of life affirms traditional Aboriginal culture and its sacred relationship with the land.

The earlier bleakness in the film reflects the fact that there has been very little social or economic progress in remote Aboriginal communities since my visit 20 years ago. In November 2011 myself and another 'whitefella' we're filming in the Todd river basin in Alice Springs, which is traditionally a camping ground for Aboriginal people visiting from the bush, but also a congenial place to drink. Consequently it has become a regular stamping ground for non-indigenous film crews who want cutaways for their documentaries on the Aboriginal 'problem' in Alice Springs[[1]](#endnote-1). We were actually after shots that showed the contrast of the graffiti covered bridge with the shiny new Imparja TV building - just across the road from the Todd river – but an Aboriginal man who we could just glimpse in the background of the shot, saw we were filming and approached us to protest, with more sadness than aggression, explaining: 'We are not animals in zoo...'

# Prominent in the graffiti on the bridge was an anti-intervention slogan – ‘Respect: Stop the Intervention’ – scrawled over a black, yellow and red aboriginal flag. In the 20 years since I had been in Alice Springs the ‘self-determination’ policies that prevailed then have been substantially reversed, not least by the recent so-called ‘Intervention’. The ‘Intervention’ (or to give it its official name ‘Northern Territory National Emergency Response’) was an attempt by the state to regulate life in remote communities in the Northern Territory in response to widespread reports of increased alcohol use, domestic violence and child sexual abuse, a response that initially involved sending the army into these communities, in 2007. This, of course, was massively controversial with both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

# The Aboriginal activist Rosalie Kunoth-Monks was a strong opponent of the Intervention, describing it as being like ‘Australia declaring war on us, and in the process they demonised and dehumanized Aboriginal [*people*]’ (Kunoth-Monks 2013). She lives in a Northern Territory community called ‘Utopia’, which became the irony-saturated title of John Pilger’s (2013) film, in which he convincingly makes the case that the demonizing of the Northern Territories by the Intervention masked what, in effect, was a state land-grab of previously semi-autonomous Aboriginal territory to make it easier to acquire and exploit mineral rights. However there also are a number of Aboriginal supporters of the Intervention. On my recent visit I met a young woman from Yuendumu in Alice Springs who saw it as an appropriate way to combat domestic violence in her community, and the lawyer and activist Noel Pearson and the anthropologist, Marcia Langton both have argued strongly in favour of the emergency response in the Northern Territory. In many ways the 'intervention' also represented a final nail in the coffin of the 'Self-determination' policies that white Australia had pursued in relation to Aboriginal people since the 1960s, and some writers have argued that self-determination as a policy had been a (well meaning) failure from the start:

Self-determination was to herald a radical change to a new era of racial equality. But equality could not be suddenly conjured into being by brave words. Differences which had been constructed and confirmed by inequality at every level through inter-racial history were in fact constitutive of the black and white people being governed (Cowlishaw 1999: 217).

This was compounded by the opposition to the policy by its many white critics, who deployed

an aggressive public rhetoric which decried self-determination as 'waste’, ridiculed the enterprises and openly predicted disaster. To protect the projects from this hostile discourse, many involved whitefellas muted their own anxiety that Aboriginal alienation from the ordinary processes of modern society was so extensive as to represent an insuperable barrier (1999: 237)

This anxiety was becoming more evident and expressed during my time in Australia, and explains some of what I heard from white people in Alice Springs and elsewhere, about Aboriginal work with video. For instance one filmmaker told me that it was ‘sad what’s happening’. 20 years ago whitefellas like him thought they’d work themselves out of jobs by training Aboriginals, but this hasn’t happened and his conclusion was that the ‘Western way of life’ was ‘too much for bush people’.

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Given that the the 'resistance model' is no longer apparently so useful and the project of ‘self-determination’ is so damaged and, what is still meaningful and important about the Central Australian experience with media? One of the lessons for me has been that it's important to look beyond the binaries - both those between oppression and resistance, and between the modern and the traditional: the work is to discover 'not "their" culture and not "our culture" but something in between'(Cowlishaw1999: 5). I still think that the space between our (Western and Aboriginal) experiences of media, can be illuminating, and we can still usefully examine our assumptions about media through understanding our projections onto the indigenous other. In the West we are all still, I'd say, in 'the belly of the beast' - in Eric Michaels' resonant phrase characterising modern mass media[[2]](#endnote-2), and this can induce a claustrophobia, that inhibits our seeing alternatives.

In *Satellite Dreaming* there’s an interview with Pantjiti Mckenzie who worked with Ernabella Video Televison. Ernabella is a Pitjantjatjara community 200 km or so south west of Alice Springs, and the site, as I’ve already mentioned, of a pirate TV experiment. She describes her work recording womens’ sacred ‘business’: ‘I record womens’ secret ceremonies in the bush. We bring it back and put it in a special cupboard. It’s for private viewing, not for making programmes. It’s good.’ ‘Private viewing’ means that these tapes can only be seen by groups of initiated women. I very much enjoy her satisfaction with a use of video and TV that is at complete variance with how we in the west have come to see the meaning and function of television as a mass medium - centre out, to an undifferentiated audience. She celebrates her videos for being local, made for a highly differentiated and restricted audience.

Jennifer Deger works in a community in Arnhem Land making videos with Yolgu people, and makes a similar point :

for Yolngu there is no generic idea of a person or audience - everyone is already constructed in kin relationships [...] which ] determine the mode of address, style of language, and even the subject matter of conversation. Thus the notion of an intimate yet undifferentiated audience that informs Western broadcasting models is fundamentally at odds with Yolngu modes of communication [...] (2006: 17)

Deger argues that Aboriginal produced media (in her experience with the Yolngu) contribute to our debates in the West about the limitations of the notion of *representation* in our understanding of how media operate. Borrowing from writers like Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack she proposes 'a different sense of the relationship between the image and the imaged. It is this that I mean by "presencing" - the sense in which so-called representing re-presents in material, tangible terms what it purports to simply copy' (2006: 100)

There's an example of this kind of thinking about the relationship between the image and the imaged in a sequence from *Satellite Dreaming*, depicting EVTV filming the sacred story of Nyiru and the Seven Sisters. At night around a campfire at Kuruala (the sacred site of the featured part of the story), the traditional custodian of the site, Noli Roberts, is giving his reasons for inviting us - the CAAMA crew and myself – to film the re-enactment of the Seven Sisters songline at one of its sacred sites: ‘When people see it they will say: ‘It’s true. I see how Nyiru and the Seven Sisters came to Kuruala’’. For him – and in most traditional Aboriginal culture – there is no distinction between fiction and fact – so everything you film is ‘true’. It’s ‘true’ that Nyiru came to Keruala, because the videoing process ‘presences’ Nyiru and the Seven Sisters - makes them present and real, not ‘fictional’.

This absence of the category of ‘fiction’ has very material consequences for Indigenous uses of contemporary digital technologies and, of course, the ‘virtual reality’ of the internet is certainly having some influence in communities in Central Australia too. I learned on my visit last year that Pantjiti McKenzie is currently involved with a web based cultural maintenance project called Ara Iritija - ‘a community-based, multimedia digital archive, designed at the request of Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (Anangu) communities’, as they describe themselves on their website[[3]](#endnote-3). Apparently the Anangu consultants on the project were alarmed when they discovered that men’s and women’s business was being stored in the same database. They insisted, not just that they were separated virtually, but physically too, stored on different computers – a contemporary version of the locked,cupboard of videos only accessible to initiated women.

While in the era of self-determination this kind of traditional cultural maintenance work - alongside more obviously political struggles around land rights - was seen as unproblematically progressive, in more recent years it has become more contested. At the time of my first visit twenty years ago, the reclaiming of traditional lands (the struggle for ‘land rights’) was analogous to the reclaiming of traditional culture through the kinds of practices described by Noli Roberts. But now the ideological underpinnings of both projects are being questioned, perhaps most clearly in the 'culture crisis' in Australianist anthropology - provoked by the Intervention – which positions those still committed to self-determination against those who think that ethnography has, in Marcia Langton’s words, been destructively

[…] governed by a gerontocracy and supported by hunter-gatherer economies and ways of life . This world no longer exists in much of Australia, and where these institutions survive, they are compromised and altered by welfare dependency, modern consumerism and a range of conditions associated with the rapid transition to modernity. (Langton 2010: 92)

Some of these intellectuals - including Langton and Philip Batty - support the Intervention as (as they see it) an appropriate mechanism to check some of these 'conditions' - notably domestic violence, child abuse and drug and alcohol dependency - that are still endemic in many remote Aboriginal communities. Traditional, gerontocratic culture, in which the elders hold sway, is seen as hostile to peoples' well being – particularly to women and young people. This view may be supported by statistics which show that ‘[...]those Indigenous Australians with the most language and culture[...] are precisely those with the worst health’ (Kowal 2010: 184) and so ‘[...]the more remote you are, the worse your health is’ (185). Kowal, however, also points to statistics on ‘outstation’ health which might undermine this connection between remoteness and ill health, statistics which suggest that people living ‘authentically’ in the outstations (like the protagonists of *Samson and Delilah* at the end of the film) mayhave better health than those living in the more regulated communities in the outback. As she says ‘[...] very, very remote' people may have better health than the merely 'very remote' (185).

However, for me the fundamental point is not about tradition versus modernity – or even about cultural and ethnic differences – but more about media power. I still agree with Eric Michaels’ conclusion to his essay on ‘Aboriginal Content’ – a criterion which the AUSSAT tribunal was anxiously trying to define to help its decision about which applicant to award the license to (CAAMA or its opponents). Michaels thought the definition of ‘Aboriginal content’ was much less urgent than the issue of who was going to make and control the media productions that were going to end up on the satellite. He concluded that:

What we need is an adequate program for local community television .(Michaels 1994: 44) If we take "community" rather than "Aboriginality" to be the subject, and make "local" the qualifier, only then do we avoid the traps of racism and paternalism in our rhetoric and practice (42).

What is clear form my recent visit is that the desire in traditional indigenous communities in Central Australia to make their own media is still very much alive – not only in Ara Iritija or *Samson and Delilah***.** To take just two examples, Noli Roberts, and others had just finished recording the final leg of the Seven Sisters story, and Francis Kelly was shooting a new version of the story of the Coniston massacre– a project he had begun with Eric Michaels in the 1980s (Michaels 2004: 110-115) These communities clearly do not doubt that their use of media and television brings real benefits, and the work continues to fascinate me as a rare example of local, community control over media representation.

**Further Reading (and Viewing)**

*Satellite Dreaming* is available at <http://www.satellitedreaming.com/> - a website which also has other research material and relevant links. There is no one book that describes Indigenous media work in Central Australia as a whole, but Bell (2008) gives a full and balanced account of the history of Imparja TV, and Eric Michaels’ writings are collected in *Bad Aboriginal Art* (2004). *Shimmering Screens* (Deger 2006) centres on media work with a Yolgu community in the north of Australia, and *Culture Crisis* (eds Altman & Hinkson 2010) gives a range of responses to the Northern Territory ‘Intervention’ from anthropological perspectives.

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1. See, for instance, *Unreported World: Australia's Hidden Valley*, broadcast in the UK while I was in Australia on Channel 4 (Unreported World 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michaels quoted by Jay Ruby (2000: 221) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.irititja.com/the_archive/index.html> (accessed 29/01/14) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)