
Aboriginal Media and the Australian Imaginary

Faye Ginsburg

Enter the Era of Satellite Dreaming: The Space-Age Way of Doing Age-Old Aboriginal Business”

Headline, *Canberra Times*, November 6, 1992, announcing the opening of an Aboriginally owned and run video-conferencing facility, the Tanimi Network, linking four remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. (Jane Dargaville, reporter)

Over the last decade, indigenously produced televisual media have emerged as new phenomena, hybrid artifacts of both “authentic” contemporary indigenous life and the place it occupies in the dominant culture’s “administrative imagination” (Rowse 1992). As they circulate in the world, indigenous media productions provide a vehicle for cultural and political communication by indigenous peoples to themselves, to majority others in the nations in which they live, and to the broader transnational polity known as the “Fourth World.” Accordingly, such

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work offers insight into the complex interdependence of indigenous peoples, the states that encompass them, and the meanings attached to the transnational circulation of indigenous imagery.

The term *indigenous media* comprehends the complex nature of the phenomena it signifies. The first word—“indigenous”—respects the understandings of those Aboriginal producers who identify themselves as “First Nations” or “Fourth World People.” These categories index the political circumstances shared by indigenous people around the globe. Whatever their cultural differences, such groups all struggle against a legacy of disenfranchisement of their lands, societies, and cultures by colonizing European societies, such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and most of Latin America. The second word—“media”—whether referring to satellites or VCRs, evokes the huge institutional structures of the television and film industries that tend to overwhelm the local cultural specificities of small-scale societies while privileging commercial interests that demand large audiences as a measure of success. While the institutional dimensions of media—especially television—shadow their intersection with the lives of indigenous people, they do not determine the outcome. Thus, the term indigenous media reminds us that this work is part of broader movements for cultural autonomy and self-determination that exist in complex tension with the structures of national governments, international politics, and the global circulation of communications technology.

I use the words film, video, and television in the same ways that the practitioners themselves use them, as I describe in detail below. In the Australian context, “television” refers to the use of electronic broadcast technologies for the production and dissemination of images to groups of people, large or small, via television monitors. Practically speaking, this encompasses a range of practices, from those that resemble British public television (Australian Broadcast Commission [ABC]) or American commercial television (Imparja) to those that use combinations of low-format video and television technologies but whose organization and work are uniquely embedded in local Aboriginal communities, for example, the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA). Such local groups have explicitly challenged the imposition of mainstream Australian television by making and showing their own and other Aboriginal videotaped productions. These might include tapes of ceremonies, local sports events, or MTV-inspired music videos performed with Aboriginal bands singing in native languages. While Aboriginal produced media tend to predominate for remote groups like WMA, their satellite dishes also draw signals from the ABC and Imparja so that communities can choose to mix in programming from these stations as well; soap operas and national sports events are especially popular.

By contrast, commercial television broadcasters such as Imparja deliver programming very similar to that seen by American television consumers, except for one or two evenings a week when programs by and about traditional Aboriginal

Australians can be seen. One lineup might segue from a situation comedy, to regional news, to indigenously produced segments on Aboriginal bush methods for cooking kangaroos, to an international soccer match. The broader cultural meaning of such unexpected combinations that emerge in *Imparja*'s televisual "flow" are a constant source of discussion. One need only turn on a television in Central Australia to provoke a lively debate as to whether Aboriginal programs are a mere token presence in the commercial context or the opening wedge for transformations in the ways that Australians are envisioning their own diversity.

These shifts in both the availability of media technologies and the images of the world created with them are part of what Arjun Appadurai has called "mediascapes." He coins this word (as well as others) in an effort to resituate our understandings of the different kinds of global cultural flows that characterize the late twentieth century. As Appadurai points out, mediascapes are "inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors. . . . Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part by their own sense of what these landscapes offer" (1990:7).

From the perspective of many Aboriginal producers, new media forms are seen as powerful means of (collective) self-expression that can have a culturally revitalizing effect (Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1990). This should not mask the fact, however, that indigenous media are also a product of relations with the governments responsible for the dire political circumstances that motivated the mastery of new communication forms as a means of resistance and assertion of rights. Ironically, in the case of liberal welfare states such as Canada and Australia, government bodies actually provide much of the necessary support for production.¹ Commenting on the broader situation in Australia, anthropologist Jeremy Beckett succinctly describes the contradiction implicit in such state funding of indigenous interests: "[A] contradictory feature of welfare colonialism is its need to secure the assent of its subjects as evidence of their political enfranchisement. This is required in terms of democratic values once indigenous people are included within the nation. . . . Ironically the subjects are often so politically weak and fragmented that the state is itself obliged to create the channels of political expression and articulate indigenous aspirations . . . which institutionalize colonial distinctions, while creating a political constituency which has simultaneously to be maintained and controlled" (Beckett 1988:14). Australian media activist Philip Batty describes these social relations in more moderate terms as a process of

1. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs began funding Aboriginal broadcasting initiatives in 1980. Since 1984, it has provided more than \$1 million each financial year to support regional Aboriginal broadcasting (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1989).

“negotiation” between the settler nation and its indigenous inhabitants, a kind of intercultural bargaining over representation that has shaped the development of indigenous media (1992:3).

Indigenous media also are situated in a broad global process of decentralization, democratization, and widespread penetration of new media technologies, such as inexpensive portable video cameras, which have given new meaning to notions of access and multicultural expression. Yet, the broad marketing of VCRs and the launching of communications satellites also brought the hegemonic shadow of mainstream television into the daily lives of indigenous people living in remote areas. The impact has been especially powerful for Inuit in the Canadian Arctic since the 1970s and Aboriginal Australians in the Central Desert since the 1980s, for whom satellites and VCRs catalyzed their first efforts at media production on the basis of both local initiatives and state interventions. This article addresses these developments, looking specifically at some of the new media being produced by, with, and for Aboriginal Australians.²

Situating Aboriginal Media

My work is part of an ongoing effort to address what anthropologist and Aboriginal cultural activist Marcia Langton has identified as the “the need to develop a body of knowledge and critical perspective [having] to do with aesthetics and politics . . . on representation of Aboriginal people and concerns in art, film, television, or other media” (1992:6). However, to open a “discursive space” for indigenous media that respects and understands the work on its own terms, I want to discuss briefly the ways in which it has been considered.

Until recently, indigenous media have been embedded in some version of one of two dominant tropes. I have summarized these elsewhere as the “Faustian contract” or the “global village” (Ginsburg 1991). The Faustian bargain model (most clearly articulated in the work of the Frankfurt School) regards “traditional culture” as something good and authentic that is irreversibly polluted by contact with high technology and media produced by mass culture. This view is very clear about what cultural domination can mean but suffers from a view of indige-

2. Because of space limitations, I can only write about a few of the most prominent sites of Aboriginal media production in broad terms. For example, I have left out any discussion of the Aboriginal Programs Units in Sydney at the ABC and SBS, Australia’s state-sponsored broadcast services, or (except for CAAMA) the five main Aboriginal regional media organizations: WAAMA (Western Australia Aboriginal Media Association); TEABBA (Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association); TAIMA (Townsville and Aboriginal Islander Media Association); TSIAMA (Torres Straits Islanders and Aboriginal Media Association) (Molnar 1990:148).

nous people as frozen in time and tradition.³ By contrast, the idea of the global village, originating in McLuhan's (1964) treatise, optimistically suggests that new media can bring together different cultures from all over the earth, creating a sense of community, one associated with village life, through progressive use of new communications technologies. Here, people and societies are recognized as constantly changing rather than determined by state, economic, or technological imperatives. However, the important, specific ways in which cultures differ and people experience political and economic inequality are erased in an ethnocentric utopian vision of an electronic democracy. New discursive possibilities are emerging in anthropology and cultural studies that self-consciously reject such polarized notions of "authenticity" and "pure culture" and that view media not as causing good or evil but as part of larger social formations (Appadurai 1990; Hall 1992). In line with such theories of cultural production, indigenous media producers perhaps can be better understood by the mediascape trope. Appadurai's use of the term argues for situated analyses that take account of the interdependence of media practices and the local, national, and transnational circumstances that surround them (Appadurai 1990:7).

In Australia, for example, Aboriginal media have become a visible element in what Annette Hamilton calls the Australian "national imaginary."⁴ Drawing on ideas from Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Jacques Lacan, Hamilton uses the term to describe the means by which contemporary nation-states constitute "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) through the circulation of televisual images even more than the print media. She uses Lacan's idea of the Imaginary as the mirror-phase in human development when the child sees its own reflection as "other": "Imaginary relations at the social, collective level can thus be seen as ourselves looking at ourselves while we think we are seeing others" (Hamilton 1990:17). As examples, Hamilton cites the current popularity of Aboriginal art and popular music, as well as films such as *Crocodile Dundee* in which the outback and Aboriginal knowledge play a critical role, as if Australian appropriation of Aboriginal culture can justify "the settler presence in the country, and indeed . . . the presence of Australia as part of a world cultural scene" (1990:18).

Given current world conditions, representations of the Australian nation must take account of what Hamilton calls an increasingly "internationalised image-environment" (1990) in which images of indigenous peoples now carry a heavy semiotic load. Aboriginal media have become implicated in the circulation of

3. For a recent example of this position, see Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, New York, Knopf, 1992.

4. For similar articulations of this idea, see Susan Dermody and Liz Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a Film Industry*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1988, and Arjun Appadurai (1990).

commodified images of Aboriginality, including “high-tech primitives” engaged in their own televisual production. Such imagery escapes the control of indigenous makers even as it valorizes and romanticizes them. What is the fascination that prompts popular magazines such as *New Society* in the United Kingdom (Miller 1986) or *Rolling Stone* in the United States (McGregor 1988) to run articles on Aboriginal television, or international *Time* magazine to run a feature story, “Letting in the World: Subversion by Video” (Beyer 1989), with a cover photo of a Kayapo man in full Amazonian regalia holding a video camera to his eye? Even in this postmodern era of the ironic pastiche, there seems to be a moment of pure modernist shock for many westerners at the seemingly incongruous combination of two different modes of life. Such images contrast with those of natives presented in traditional settings (the noble but exoticized savage) or as victims (the vanishing race) that are now problematic for Euro-Australian (and other) consumers who are increasingly aware of and uncomfortable with their own implication in the lives and historical circumstances of these “Others.” Conversely, I would argue, there is a pleasure for these consumers in regarding the image of the indigenous photographer as a kind of bush cosmopolitan, at ease with both tradition and western technology;⁵ such an image evokes a kind of futuristic nostalgia, even as it masks inequality and responsibility.

Commodified images of Aboriginal producers, along with Aboriginal art and music, are part of the cultural capital on which contemporary Australia builds its national image for consumption and circulation in the arenas of tourism, political affairs, and the marketing of culture overseas (Beckett 1988; Hamilton 1990; Myers 1991). In a national and international climate characterized by a complex and sometimes contradictory rhetoric of “self-determination,” politicians want to be known as funding indigenous self-expression, yet they also want to claim that Aboriginal media organizations have evolved through a historical process of self-determination (Beckett 1988; Rowse 1992).⁶ Ironically, however, the government programs they create have been largely ineffective and, some argue, actually undermine any real creativity or initiative (Batty 1992).

Despite the problematic relationship of indigenous media producers to national governments and public cultures, they are not simply exploited by nation-states to “create various kinds of international spectacle to domesticate difference” (Apadurai 1990:13). It is important to understand how they enter transnational mediascapes in complex and multidirectional ways. For example, indigenous production is the focus of events that are constitutive of a global Fourth World/First Nations identity. Indigenous political organizers, eager to build cross-

5. See Fry and Willis (1989) and Michaels (1988) for examples of this.

6. For anthropological analyses of Aboriginal “self-determination” and the production of Aboriginal identity in relation to the state, see Beckett (1988).

national alliances with other First Nations, have been quick to recognize the power of visual media to transcend linguistic and cultural differences. Since 1985 international film/video festivals for the work of indigenous peoples have burgeoned, creating new international networks of indigenous cooperation.⁷ For many indigenous producers, these festivals, as events that reinforce political solidarity, are preferred venues over more “high culture” national institutions that focus on artistic achievement, such as the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney or the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that have made some effort at showcasing indigenous work.

Aboriginal Media: Background

In examining the range of Aboriginal media, it is important to understand how works are shaped by the interdependence of specific local situations and historically changing government policies. The combined effects of these circumstances have resulted in a number of Aboriginal media practices, demonstrating the different ways that indigenous and national interests intersect. Media productions are enmeshed in transformations in the consciousness of both Aboriginal and Euro-Australians; they are the concrete products of ongoing negotiations concerning Aboriginality in the “Australian national imaginary.” The ever-increasing involvement of Australian Aboriginal people in visual media production over the last two decades is in part, a legacy of the Labor government’s liberal-Left policy toward Aboriginal “self-determination” from 1972 to 1975 (Leigh 1988).⁸

Aboriginal work in film and video is as diverse as the Aboriginal producers who make it, from traditional bush-living people to urban dwellers whose history of contact with Euro-Australian culture may go back as far as two hundred years. Urban Aborigines, such as avant-garde filmmaker/photographer Tracey Moffat, produce work comfortably within the structures of an international independent film world (see fig. 1), albeit addressing problematic issues of Aboriginal identity (Murray 1990). At the other end of the spectrum are traditional people living in remote areas of central and western Australia, whose contact history may be as

7. These festivals include the Native American Film Festivals held regularly in San Francisco and New York City; the Two Rivers Festival held in Minnesota in 1991 and 1992; the Pincher Creek World Festival of Aboriginal Motion Pictures (now known as Dreamspeakers) held annually in Edmonton, Alberta; and the 1993 Deadwood Film Festival in Deadwood, South Dakota.

8. Different aspects of this involvement are summarized nicely in essays by film historian Michael Leigh (1988), filmmaker David MacDougall (1987), as well as the late Eric Michaels (1986) and communications scholar Helen Molnar (1989), who reminds us that many remote-living Aborigines have been producing their own radio programming since the 1970s, “leaping over the print generation to begin recording their languages, stories, music and culture” (Molnar 1990:148).



Figure 1. Marcia Langton in “Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy” by Tracey Moffat. Photo Courtesy of Women Make Movies, New York, NY.

brief as a few decades and who have been experimenting with video production strategies to suit their very local concerns.

While to Euro-Australians, different “traditional” groups may seem undistinguishable, linguistic variation alone makes it clear that they are not a monolithic block; of the two hundred Aboriginal languages originally spoken, approximately sixty are still in active use today (Black 1983:3). Unfortunately, this diversity has not always been accounted for by those setting Aboriginal broadcast policy (Molnar 1990:147), which began in the early 1980s when the government appointed a task force to report on the impact of new communications technology for Aboriginal Australians (Wilmott 1984). Of particular concern were the potential negative consequences of the planned launch of a communications satellite, AUS-SAT, on Aboriginal people living in remote areas. Indeed, by the mid-1980s in

Central Australia, families were leaving settlements such as Yuendumu to keep their children from being exposed to television.⁹

Outback Television: Yuendumu and Ernabella

Before the setting of government policy, two important community-based Aboriginal media associations developed at the relatively traditional remote settlements of Yuendumu in Central Australia and Ernabella in South Australia. While the government provided some of the initial equipment, its sponsorship was indirect. Of much greater importance was the sustained presence of sympathetic and knowledgeable white advisers. Their commitment to the development of media practices consonant with community interests and cultural practices played a crucial role in the success of these early experiments, in addition to their technical and bureaucratic support.

At Yuendumu, American researcher Eric Michaels's concern with culturally appropriate uses of media was catalytic. He had been hired by the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1982 to conduct a long-term study of Aboriginal viewing practices in Central Australia. He chose to work with Warlpiri-speaking Aboriginal people at Yuendumu in the Central Desert. While this and many other Aboriginal communities had not received the steady flow of broadcast television, they were acquainted with popular cinema through community viewings of rented films, going to movies in nearby towns, and the circulation and viewing of videos their own or resident whites' VCRs (Michaels 1986).

Favoring an activist approach over pure research, Michaels helped train people to produce their own videos based on Aboriginal concerns. The WMA grew out of this activity. Between 1982 and 1984, Warlpiri videomakers produced more than fifty tapes. Originally intended for use in their school, the works covered subjects ranging from traditional dances, to a memorial of a massacre of Warlpiri people by whites, to local sports events. In April 1985, WMA established its own local low-power television station via a homemade transmitter that pulled in the signal for the state television channel, ABC, and also provided a broadcast outlet for locally produced tapes. The WMA and other similar operations were considered illegal because the state had no licensing category for such small-scale broadcasters (Michaels 1986). This bureaucratic vacuum for Aboriginal media was an important index of an ambivalent governmental stance toward Aboriginal initiatives, despite the commitment to Aboriginal self-determination in policy rhetoric.

9. Personal communication from anthropologist Françoise Dussart, who was living at Yuendumu at the time.

From the local perspective, government neglect had positive effects. It meant that there was room for community control and the development of an innovative production style, both aesthetically and in work relations, appropriate to local social organization, narrative conventions, and communicative strategies. Eric Michaels argued that the substance and formal qualities of the tapes have a distinctly Warlpiri sensibility. For example, in contrast to the free-floating signifiers that characterize most Western televisual semiotics, Warlpiri tapes show an intense focus on particular landscapes, consistent with the way traditional Aboriginal knowledge is made meaningful by associations with specific geographic locations. But, of equal if not more importance is the social organization of media production; the ways in which tapes are made, shown, and used reflect Warlpiri understandings of kinship and group responsibilities for ceremonial production and the control of traditional knowledge (Michaels 1984b).

Similar developments to WMA occurred at Ernabella, a remote Pitjantjatjara community in South Australia (Batty 1992; Molnar 1989:25; N. Turner 1990). There, in 1983, local people, with the help of white schoolteachers, began producing video programs reflecting their cultural practices and daily activities that immediately became quite popular. By April 1985, Ernabella Video Television (EVTV) was established. Neil Turner, EVTV's long-standing Euro-Australian coordinator and advocate, succinctly describes how the group sustained its initial base of operations. "EVTV commenced local broadcasting on the world's cheapest community television transmission system (less than \$1,000 worth of equipment purchased for a 10 cent surcharge on cool drinks in the store)" (quoted in Dutchak 1992:48). In seven years, EVTV has produced more than one hundred hours of community television. Broadcast is strictly regulated by the local media committee in terms of both substance—so that images are not shown that violate cultural rules regulating what can be seen (e.g., sacred ceremonies)—and timing, so that television does not interfere with social activities. Rather than compete with traditional practices, EVTV's recordings of songs, dances, and ceremonies of mythic *Tukurrrpa* ("Dreaming Stories") has had a revitalizing effect on Aboriginal dance and music at Ernabella and throughout South Australia (Batty 1992:9).

Administering Cultural Expression: BRACS

By 1987, WMA and EVTV were regarded as examples of successful indigenous initiative, in keeping with the ideas of self-determination that currently guide Australia's "administrative imagination" concerning Aborigines. They became models for the setting of government policies and funding efforts to introduce televisual technologies into other communities, made concrete in a program called BRACS (Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme), a much-delayed response to the 1984 Task Force Report. BRACS was set up to give

eighty participating remote Aboriginal communities low-end video and radio equipment for receiving and rebroadcasting satellite television signals as well as for producing programs. Unfortunately, this effort to duplicate local creativity through a bureaucracy has been a notable failure; policymakers have been unwilling to allocate sufficient resources and attention to carry out the intention of the program.

Originally, the provision of media equipment was conceived as a way to protect and promote local culture and languages against the intrusion of national or commercial television. The intention was to give Aboriginal people in remote areas the capacity to interrupt satellite transmission with their own programming (Dutchak 1992:49). However, BRACS, with a few exceptions, has had the opposite effect; most communities simply use the equipment to receive mainstream television. The reasons for this are multiple: there was almost no consultation with Aboriginal communities and no provision for maintenance, training, repairs, upgrades, suitable buildings, electricity, or cassettes, all of which are necessary for the development of local media production. The lack of support for maintenance is particularly shortsighted: the harsh environmental conditions of most remote communities would challenge the hardest of equipment. BRACS setups are of such poor quality that they have very short life spans and production quality is compromised accordingly. Finally, policymakers failed to consider the critical role of knowledgeable and committed advisers (white or Aboriginal) in providing expertise and time to help communities develop media practices in keeping with their specific concerns. It is hardly surprising, then, that the only successful BRACS programs are those that were established in settlements already experienced in media production (Molnar 1990).

From Bush Radio to Satellites: CAAMA and Imparja

BRACS is just one example of the increasing interest and problematic intervention of the Australian government in the development of Aboriginal media over the 1980s. Another example, the development of Imparja, Australia's first Aboriginal-owned commercial television station, demonstrates how well-intentioned government support for Aboriginal representation in commercial television actually resulted in the absorption of Aboriginal interests into Euro-Australian media practices.

The story of Imparja originates in governmental concern over the consequences for Aboriginal people of the 1985 launch of Australia's first communications satellite, AUSSAT (Molnar 1990). With it came the introduction of commercial television to remote areas of the nation for the first time, including many Aboriginal settlements and communities in Central Australia whose geographic isolation had protected them from such intrusions. But it was not only policymakers who

worried about the destructive potential of this development to Aboriginal languages and cultures in the area. Both European and Aboriginal members of CAAMA, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association,¹⁰ mobilized and made a bid for the satellite downlink license to Central Australia. Their petition to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal was made initially as a symbolic assertion of the presence and concerns of that region's Aboriginal people. Much to their surprise, their proposal was taken seriously. As it turned out, the tribunal provided the arena for the articulation of national media policies at least nominally in support of the concerns of remote-living Aboriginal people. As stated by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, "The Tribunal's decision to award one of these licenses to Imparja indicates the importance it places on Aboriginal involvement in television services in remote areas" (1989:4). In 1986, after considerable struggle with more commercially viable competitors, CAAMA won the Regional Commercial Television Services (RCTS) license for the satellite television downlink to Central Australia with financial assistance from various government sources.¹¹ The private commercial station they now own, Imparja, began broadcasting in January 1988, serving approximately 100,000 viewers in Central Australia, more than a quarter of them Aboriginal (Batty 1992).

Thus far, in addition to public service announcements and logos with images of Aboriginal people, Imparja has been broadcasting regular Aboriginal programs produced by CAAMA. Their most successful program has been "Nganampa—Anwernekenhe" ("Ours"), a magazine show in four Aboriginal languages (with English subtitles) intended to help maintain Aboriginal culture through art, music, stories, and dances. In 1991, Imparja also ran a series of independent films by or about Aboriginal people—*Talking Strong*—over a seven-month period on Saturday nights. Currently, "Nganampa" continues to be produced and broadcast on Thursday nights at 8:00, and Aboriginal programs produced for stations in other parts of Australia are rebroadcast on Imparja as well. As part of their support for Aboriginal health concerns, Imparja does not sell commercials for alcohol.

In its first two years, Imparja was viewed with great optimism by Aboriginal and progressive Australians (Fry and Willis 1989; McPherson 1988), although

10. Like many of the other Aboriginal media associations, CAAMA was established as a radio station in 1980 by two Aboriginal people and one "whitefella." It quickly became one of the most popular radio stations for both blacks and whites in the Northern Territory, combining country-western, Aboriginal rock, call-ins, and discussion of news of concern to Aborigines in six native languages and English for nearly fifteen hours a day. It later expanded to AM and shortwave broadcasts, educational shows, recording of Aboriginal bands, and retailing Aboriginal goods. In 1984, CAAMA began producing video newsletters for circulation to communities without access to radio.

11. Imparja's initial funding came from the Australian Bicentennial Authority (\$2.5 million), the Aboriginal Development Commission (\$1.8 million), the National Aboriginal Education Commission (\$1.5 million), and the South Australian Government (\$1 million).

some media activists prophesied that Aboriginal interests would be swallowed up by the “survival needs” of a multimillion-dollar commercial television operation (Michaels 1984). Many since have come to agree with the latter position; they are disappointed by the lack of Aboriginal presence in *Imparja*’s programming and personnel (Batty 1992:17). While *Imparja* is the only large-scale commercial television station owned by Australian Aboriginal people, only 10 percent of the television staff is Aboriginal.¹² There also have been complaints, especially from other Aboriginal people, that two to three hours out of seventy hours a week, even at prime time, is insufficient Aboriginal programming.

Others are concerned about *Imparja*’s stress on “broadcast quality”—an elusive and problematic term for somewhat arbitrary technical standards used by many television stations to effectively keep low-budget and unconventional work off the air. The result has been to limit *Imparja*’s use of material produced by WMA and EVTV and other local Aboriginal media associations. It also restricts CAAMA’s ability to produce programming for *Imparja* because of the costs involved in such work. A thirty-minute “broadcast quality” piece could cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000, while imported American shows can be purchased inexpensively (Molnar 1989:23).

The question of advertising also has an impact on programming content for any commercial television outlet. *Imparja*, like the other Australian satellite downlinks, struggles to meet the \$4.5 million satellite rental fee via advertising revenues that will never grow significantly because the population numbers (and therefore potential consumers) are low. Aboriginal programming is regarded as not lucrative because there is a dropoff in European viewers; advertisers—who are mostly local business people—do not view Aboriginal people as significant consumers. In contrast to small-scale groups like WMA and EVTV, *Imparja* is a large multi-million-dollar station in which information flows follow the imperatives of commercial television oriented toward mass audiences. The “need” for advertising—and therefore programs that are assumed to draw big audiences—always supersedes investment in programming for Aboriginal viewers, in keeping with the management’s orientation toward profits and Euro-Australian interests. As media scholar Helen Molnar points out: “European mass media with its homogenized messages transmitted from a central source are at odds with Aboriginal information patterns. Aborigines see their local areas as the centre from which information

12. To help correct this problem, in 1988, CAAMA and *Imparja* made a training agreement with the Department of Education, Employment and Training to train thirty-three Aboriginal people who were supposed to be taken on as permanent employees at the end of their training; the fact that this did not happen was in part responsible for a change in leadership at CAAMA in 1992 and ongoing criticism of *Imparja*.

emanates. Their information/communications model is completely the reverse of the European model which sees the urban cities as the centre and the remote communities as the periphery. The mass media not only ignores local boundaries (Aboriginal countries), it also makes information accessible to all viewers” (Molnar 1989:8).

Yet, *Imparja*, as one of the first indigenously owned commercial television station in the world, is held up by the government as a successful example of Aboriginal development and self-determination (Batty 1992:18). The comments of a 1991 Nigerian visitor to *Imparja* are instructive.

He had been told that this was the only Aboriginally owned television station in Australia, and was therefore keen to see how an indigenous group ran such a service and in what ways it differed from mainstream stations. He was amazed to learn that the federal government had given the local Aboriginal people more than \$18 million to set up and run *Imparja* over three years, but even more perplexed to discover that the station only employed four Aboriginal people (at the time) out of a total staff of thirty two and that *Imparja*’s programming was 98% white! (Batty 1992:18).

More locally based groups are able to develop rules for video production and viewing appropriate to their own community standards. For example, WMA and EVTV, unlike *Imparja* and BRACS, have maintained Aboriginal control and creativity in developing television and video. As Philip Batty assesses it:

[WMA and EVTV] had managed to establish their own local television service funded through their own local resources and became familiar with the basic processes of television production, long before the arrival of global television. . . .

So when we talk about “resistance” to global television, it seems that this can only be accomplished in any effective way, by gaining an active if basic knowledge of television technology, and applying that knowledge in locally relevant and meaningful ways, and thereby be in a position to develop the confidence and the community consciousness to deal with global television on an equal footing. (Batty 1992:11)

The case of *Imparja* makes clear that even well-intentioned attempts to increase the visibility, accomplishments, and concerns of Aboriginal people in the mass media are often fraught with complexities that white policymakers would rather ignore. Multicultural rhetoric of inclusion can gloss over the fact that the scale and “rules” of mass media can easily overwhelm local Aboriginal concerns.

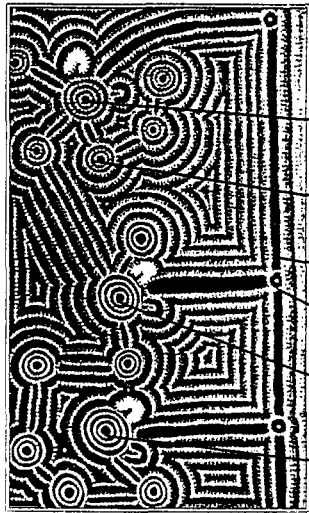
The recent development of the Tanami Network offers a telling contrast to *Imparja*. In this case, western video technology is being used in the service of Aboriginal communication needs, creating a completely innovative use of televi-sual media. In 1992, when I worked in Central Australia for the second time, criticisms of *Imparja* by more remote Aboriginal media associations had escalated. Regarding *Imparja* as deaf to their complaints, WMA members and others at Yuendumu became engaged in an effort to harness new communications technologies in ways more suited to their concerns and activities. Along with other Aboriginal communities in the Tanami area of Central Australia (Lajamanu, Willowra, and Kintore), they formed the Tanami Network, a video-conferencing system that uses satellite signals to link these settlements to each other and to the cities of Alice Springs, Darwin, and Sydney. The state-of-the-art compressed video technology that they are using allows groups of people to see and hear each other via what some have called a "space-age picture telephone" (O'Loughlin 1992). As an indication of their interest, the communities jointly contributed over \$350,000 in mining royalties and other community funds to establish this system.

Their sentiments were articulated at a workshop at Yuendumu in 1990 when the technology was first demonstrated to the community. There, two paintings by a Warlpiri woman, Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan, were used to show different models of communication (see fig. 2). In the first painting, depicting the current hegemonic model, Warlpiri communities are shown as dependent for information on *kardiya* (white people's) centers such as Alice Springs or Darwin. The second painting represents the Tanami Network's decentralized, interactive model in which large white settlements are not privileged over smaller Aboriginal ones (Yuendumu Community Education Centre 1990:4). (See fig. 3 from *The Canberra Times* for a contrasting, Euro-Australian representation.)

At a conference in March 1992, shortly after the network had been put in place, Peter Toyne, a former principal of the Yuendumu school who has been active in organizing the network, placed the network's goals in cultural and historical context from a Warlpiri perspective.

The establishment of the Tanami communities over the last 50 years severely disrupted the traditional network of information and personal contacts which existed amongst people in the area. The Aboriginal people have responded by attempting to reassemble the earlier network through the use of motor vehicles . . . outstations . . . and through such telephone and radio links as have escaped the restrictive control of non-Aboriginals in the communities. . . . Aboriginal community members have stated repeatedly that they want the links to work out family

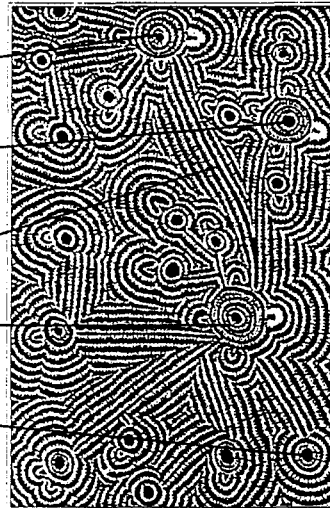
THE MEANING OF JEANNIE NUNGARRAYI EGAN'S PAINTINGS



FIRST PAINTING
 In this model information can travel easily to government centres but it is more expensive and indirect to contact your family in other communities

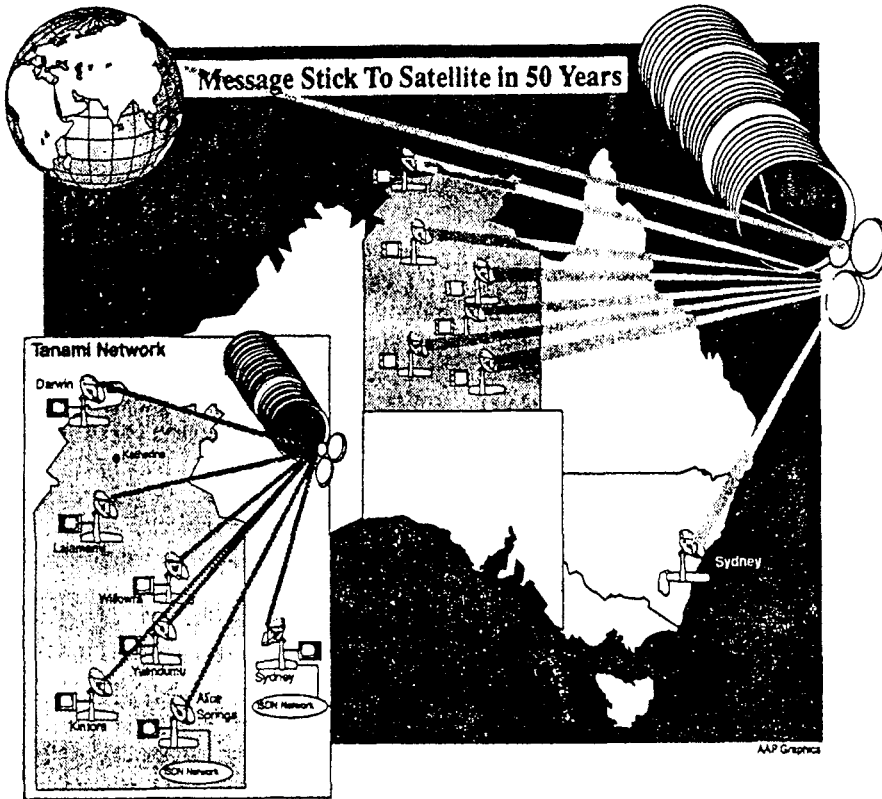
- Lajamanu with its kardiya (whitefella) and yapa (Warrlpiri) inhabitants.
- Lajamanu outstations.
- Main communication routes (roads, telephones)
- Kardiya towns (Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine)
- Willowra and its outstations yapa and kardiya inhabitants
- Yuendumu and its outstations yapa and kardiya inhabitants

SECOND PAINTING - This model is a true network. It is just as easy for information to be shared between families and communities as it is between communities and Government centres.



- Lajamanu surrounded by its outstations
- Willowra surrounded by its outstations
- Pathways join all places together and are of equal importance
- Yuendumu surrounded by its outstations
- Alice Springs

Figure 2. Aboriginal paintings signifying two different models for constructing media networks with remote Aboriginal communities. The top painting represents a hegemonic system, while the bottom painting is interactive and democratic. Drawing courtesy of the Yuendumu Community Education Centre.



things and help keep the traditions and Aboriginal law strong. . . . The Tanami Network is being developed in the belief that it offers a completely new line of approach to many of these problems by changing the basic dialogue through which the services are planned and delivered. (Toyne 1992:1)

While some are skeptical of the expense and specialized nature of the technology at a time when so many basic needs—health, nutrition, shelter—are not adequately served, others are intrigued by the Tanami Network’s possibilities. The network has already been used for purposes as diverse as “sorry business” (funeral arrangements), driver’s education, and long-distance marketing of Aboriginal art (Toyne 1992).

The interests of Euro-Australians and policymakers in this new project are enmeshed in the construction of Aboriginality in the current “Australian imagi-

Figure 3. Euro-Australian representation of the Tanami Network video communications system for *The Canberra Times*, November 6, 1992. AAP Graphics.

nary.” A headline in Australia’s capital—“Resourceful Aborigines use latest technology to preserve tribal life” (*Canberra Times* 1992)—captures one dimension of this construction, depicting Australia’s media-savvy natives as a mirror of an ideal Euro-Australian middle class: clever and up-to-date, yet conservative. For policymakers attempting to carry out the contradictions of administering self-determination, the network offers a positive affirmation of initiative on the part of remote-living Aborigines. Thus, whatever its outcome or relative utility, one can see in the Tanami experiment a convergence of Aboriginal and national interests regarding the development of televisual technologies in ways that take into account traditional Aboriginal patterns of communication. Most optimistically, the Tanami Network suggests that, when indigenous producers are given opportunities to develop new media technologies on their own terms, the results can be innovative, culturally appropriate, and potentially revitalizing.

Mediating Aboriginal Identities

The range of media generated with, by, and for Aboriginal Australians corresponds to the diverse social positions they occupy, the various ways they have attempted to gain visibility and cultural control over their own images, and the manner in which they are positioned in Australia’s national imaginary. Such diversity has flourished, I argue, in part because of the space opened up by the contradictory conditions that shape its production and reception in both dominant and Aboriginal cultures. For example, in Australia, the policy of administered self-determination for Aborigines (with all its contradictions) emerged in the 1980s from a broader ideological climate favoring multicultural expression as an acceptable version of the Australian polity (Hamilton 1990). In service to that vision, Aboriginal media productions received support in part because they are seen as a way to mediate historically produced social ruptures in various “imagined community/ies” of the nation. The mediations they make may be seen as social/spatial—linking diverse populations—as well cultural/temporal—bridging the past, present, and future, as is evident in the following headline announcing the debut of the Tanami Network: “Tribal business has gone space age in the outback” (O’Loughlin 1992).

The issues shaping indigenous media producers are not confined to national public cultures as their work is increasingly visible in global mediascapes, sometimes via the distorted image of the technologically able but traditionally exotic indigene. Unfortunately, while this image of a “primitive” but seemingly empowered “other” appeals to western Rousseauistic fantasies, it simultaneously denies the realities that shape much of contemporary indigenous life. Of much greater importance are the transnational connections being built by indigenous producers themselves who have been using media as the basis for organizing film festivals

and conferences.¹³ These events are becoming the basis for constituting an emergent global network of indigenous media producers, such as the First Nations Film and Video Makers World Alliance formed at the September 1992 Dreamspeakers Festival in Edmonton, Canada. Rather than accept the dominant cultural model that privileges the media text, producers stress the *activities* of the production and reception of indigenous media. These social relations built out of media practices are creating new networks of indigenous cooperation, locally, nationally, and internationally, rendering visible indigenous cultural and historical realities to themselves and the broader societies that have stereotyped or denied them.

From the perspective of Aboriginal producers, these collective processes concerning their media work are never separated from movements for cultural autonomy, social justice, and claims to land. These assertions about the relationships between politics and representation, in turn, have an impact on the way national governments view and support indigenous media. As the Australian Minister of Aboriginal Affairs proclaimed at the recent official opening of the Tanami Network:

. . . the network was a “shining example of the determination and dogged persistence” of Aboriginal people in their quest for social justice.

“There’s obviously something very wonderful about today when we can see the very latest technology being used to work with the people of the oldest surviving culture on earth”

Robert Tickner quoted in Dargaville 1992

The minister’s articulation of the place of indigenous media in the Australian imaginary, while consistent with the desires of an administrative imagination focused on Aboriginal self-determination, is also a response to the insistence by indigenous producers themselves that their work is on a continuum with social action for Aboriginal rights. Although their perspectives and motives certainly differ, indigenous producers and government administrators alike see Aboriginal media as helping to construct an inclusive if uneasy vision of the nation that, at least televisually, is beginning to take account of its Aboriginal citizens.

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13. See n. 7.

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