

SATELLITE DREAMING

*M*aking a TV documentary about indigenous people's television in Australia

Tony Dowmunt

In the UK my work has been in television and community-based media. During a trip to Australia in 1986 I was excited to hear that Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) were applying for and had a chance of winning a licence to run a commercial satellite TV station, and went to talk to Philip Batty (Deputy Managing Director of the CAAMA Group). In England we were in our sixth year of Thatcher; progressive developments in TV were off the agenda, and community media work was in retreat. The CAAMA plan was a potentially inspiring mix of cultural politics and new technology.

Back in the UK I managed to keep in touch with developments at CAAMA, and, with colleagues, to find out more about indigenous people's TV, both in Australia and elsewhere (particularly in New Zealand and with the Inuit in Canada). We were able to convince Channel 4 to put development money into a three part series featuring Aboriginal, Maori, and Inuit uses of TV. In the end they were unable to finance the production of the series, but provided just enough for CAAMA Productions to be able to co-produce the Australian program with us. So now I'm back in Alice Springs; we've shot the program and are in the process of editing it, of trying to make sense of the material we've gathered.

We shot sequences with the Aboriginal Production Unit at the ABC, with the SBS. Gerry and Lester Bostock of Kuri Productions in Sydney, Imparja TV and CAAMA in Alice Springs, the Warlpiri Media Association in Yuendumu, and EVTV (Ernabella Video Television) in Ernabella and way out on location videoing a songline and traditional Inma in Western Australia. We wanted to look at the whole range of Aboriginal television, from the most urban to the most 'remote' and traditional, from national broadcasting to localised community activity, with the aim of discovering what worked and what didn't, which



Above: Two elders outside Ernabella Video Television HQ.

Below: On location at Ernabella during videoing of dance and songs



models genuinely empowered Aboriginal TV makers, and which left whites in control.

Aboriginal controlled television of any kind is a very recent phenomenon. Coverage of Aboriginal people and issues has up to the last few years been almost non-existent in mainstream programming: there are no Aboriginal faces in national ads, only occasional appearances in soaps, and where communities do feature in news and documentaries, they are routinely featured either as 'problems', frequently related to alcohol or violence, or, in the case of 'remote' peoples, as exotic and strange, in need of interpretation by white anthropologists.

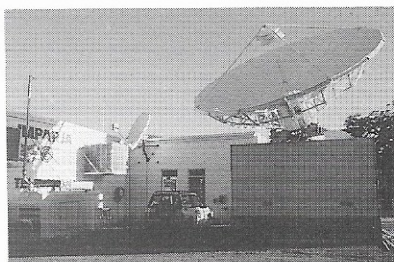
In an attempt to redress the balance both the ABC and the SBS in Sydney have been experimenting with Aboriginal programming. The ABC has set up its own Aboriginal Production Unit which is currently in pre-production with a new series of *Blackout*, a documentary format which achieved high ratings in its last run. SBS's equivalent, *First in Line*, which was more of a magazine style show with presenters, has been off the air for well over a year; they are trying to find the money to replace it at the moment. Both stations face the difficulty that as national stations they are attempting to address the majority white audience which some of the Aboriginal staff feel leads to compromises in tone and content, and their resources are sorely stretched trying to cover stories from communities all over Australia.

CAAMA applied for the license to run what became Imparja TV because they felt it was the only way to guarantee access for Aboriginal groups to the recently launched satellite, and as a result they received a massive amount of support from traditional Aboriginal communities worried about the effect of unrestricted TV on their languages and culture. However the commercial realities of running the station for an audience that is 70-75% European have meant that the amount of Aboriginal programming is currently running at less than 1% of the output, while consuming around 15% of the production budget. Imparja achieves something of an Aboriginal 'feel' through its station identification and Community Service Announcements but it is clear that its commercial structure almost completely inhibits its potential for substantial cultural intervention on behalf of Aboriginal people. The CAAMA produced and broadcast *Nganampa Anwernekenhe*, is

the only programme in Aboriginal languages on Australian TV, but there is not enough money to keep it on throughout the year.

The production process for *Nganampa* is enormously complex (and therefore expensive), involving lengthy bush trips and sensitive negotiation with communities to gather material; it also serves as field experience for the TV trainees at CAAMA. There is an ongoing debate within CAAMA and Imparja about *Nganampa* and its production values: should the stories be presented by the elders straight, with no cutaways? Should the program address regional issues, not just community stories? To what extent and in what ways should *Nganampa* employ white television conventions, or should it try to evolve specifically Aboriginal techniques?

One of the original hopes for Imparja was that it would transmit material from the community stations at Yuendumu and Ernabella, and from other communities which had BRACS units. The



resources and commitment necessary for this to happen have yet to be made available. BRACS (Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme) was designed to provide communities with the equipment to receive radio and TV signals off the new satellite, and, more importantly, to be able to produce their own programmes to substitute for the satellite material should the community decide to do so. The models for this were the Warlpiri Media Association and EVTU, who both anticipated the coming of the satellite and its potential effects on their culture, and have been originating programming in Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara and transmitting it locally (at first, illegally) since the early 1980s to prepare and forearm themselves against the influx of white media. Those responsible for BRACS overlooked a number of factors about these models when introducing the equipment: the initiatives in Ernabella and Yuendumu came from the communities themselves, remain under the control of strong local

committees, and are the product of years of work and learning by both Aboriginal people and their white advisers. The BRACS equipment was inadequately field-tested and has been dropped into communities with little or no forewarning and minimal provision for training. As a consequence there are numerous cases where the equipment remains under the firm control of white members of the community (in a couple of cases, in their front rooms or offices), acting as a passive conduit for material from the satellite into the community; and where there is production activity this is often due to the accidental presence of someone in the community with media skills.

Both EVTU and the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA) are themselves involved in training and stimulating production in other communities with BRACS units, in their own language group, as well as operating their own language and cultural maintenance schemes. The WMA helped produce *Manyu Wana*, a Warlpiri equivalent to *Sesame St.*, made entirely on location in Yuendumu with local children, and are currently exploring the potential of Compressed Video - a cheap way to transmit TV pictures via satellite which they intend to use to link up Warlpiri communities hundreds of kilometres apart. Because of its low cost, this may prove to be a more practical and effective way to exploit the satellite in Aboriginal interests than Imparja has yet found.

For our program we went on location with EVTU, driving 600 kilometres from Ernabella into Western Australia, to shoot them videoing a Western section of the Seven Sisters songline and other traditional dances and songs. By the time we reached the site at Kurulda there were over sixty of us, the majority having joined the party along the route. The people from Wingillina remembered a song that had come originally from Ooldea, about 800 kilometres to the South East, and which hadn't been performed for 40 years. They sang it for the people from Ernabella, who also learnt it and joined in. EVTU videoed the song along with all the other performances of the trip, left a copy in Wingillina for them to play on their BRACS system, then returned to Ernabella, edited and transmitted the footage locally. Their use of video was starting to mirror and extend the traditional exchange of Inma from community to community over vast distances.

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To return briefly to the issue of which models of TV production genuinely empower Aboriginal people, it appears that the further from cities and towns the work is, the more the initiative remains in Aboriginal hands. Whilst *Blackout* and *Nganampa Anwernekenhe* are fascinating programmes, the institutional contexts in which they are made inhibit their Aboriginal producers in a way that doesn't exist in *Ernabella* or *Yuendumu*. In modern media economies, the wider your audience reach, the greater the constraints on production.

Another conclusion I have come to is how vulnerable almost all of the work we look at in the program is because of lack of finance and serious government interest. ETV and Warlpiri Media are underfunded, there is not enough training going on to realise the potential of BRACS, Imparja cannot fulfil its original aims because of commercial pressures and *Nganampa* and the CAAMA training program are both threatened with cuts. Even SBS are dependent on outside funding for their proposed new Aboriginal programme to replace *First in Line*, which will use material from Aboriginal media groups nationally (who are themselves presumably dependent to some degree on the same sources of funds SBS is approaching). As in England, arts and community organisations are being pressured to earn money, to become more commercial, yet some aspects of this work will always be incapable of showing a profit. As Philip Batty points out, Aboriginal languages and culture are an Australian national treasure, and the evidence of our programme is that Aboriginal communities are using television inventively to maintain and develop this treasure. To leave this activity unsupported would be an act of racist vandalism by neglect. ■

'Satellite Dreaming' is a CAAMA Production, in association with Channel 4 and APT Film and Television in the UK, co-produced by Ivo Burum and Tony Dowmunt, and directed by Ivo Burum.