

# SINGING THE ELECTRIC

## Aboriginal Television in Australia

*Philip Batty*

In 1984, a family of Pintupi people were escorted into the remote Aboriginal community of Kiwirrkura, located on the edge of the Gibson Desert, Western Australia. They had never seen white people or the artefacts of white culture before. Their thoughts on seeing cars, houses, windmills, aeroplanes and fences, for the first time, are difficult to imagine, although one of them said that he felt as though he was being ensnared in a cobweb when one of his relatives (a man who had met Europeans years before) covered his naked body with a shirt and a pair of trousers. A few months after their entrance into the world of the non-Aboriginal, they sat and watched a live news report from Washington, on a battery-operated television set, linked to a local satellite receiver.

Global television is a fact of life for almost all of us. We can follow the latest regional war or witness the collapse of nations as they happen, from the comfort of our sitting rooms or, in the case of the Pintupi, under the shade of a mulga tree. During the Gulf War, George Bush was reputed to have said that he watched television in order to get the most up-to-date reports of the war. Apparently, Cable Network News (CNN) could get information to the President of the United States quicker than his official intelligence machine: for a few minutes, George Bush may have known as much about what was happening in the Gulf War as the Pintupi in Western Australia.

What effect, if any, has the spread of global television had on minority groups and their cultures? Do the children of these marginalised groups learn to despise their own cultural inheritance after prolonged exposure to the dazzling cosmos of network television? Do they gradually abandon their own traditional languages for the dominant language

heard via the television set? Does global television act as a kind of subtle drug of acculturation, seducing then destroying indigenous peoples? Or has the emergence of global television given all peoples throughout the world the opportunity to become citizens of a common global village, with equal access to all manner of information and 'global knowledge'? Has television, in fact, opened a window to the world for all minority people and released them from their cultural ghettos?

There was a time when I could have provided easy answers to all these questions. There was no doubt in my mind that imported or 'alien' television programming, especially delivered direct from satellite, would have devastating effects on local Aboriginal cultures and languages. But after many years of work in the field of rural and indigenous broadcasting development, I'm not so sure.

I don't think it is entirely true or particularly helpful to characterise the emergence of what might be described as 'Aboriginal television' simply as the result of Aboriginal people taking an oppositional stance to the introduction of European-style television into their communities. This would be too simplistic a description of the many and varied 'styles' of Aboriginal television in Australia today. Some groups have indeed taken a highly oppositional approach to the imposition of global television on their lives. Others have used the technologies associated with television to support and even strengthen traditional cultural activities. Some Aboriginal people have simply intervened in existing television services to ensure that Aboriginal issues are appropriately presented, while others are only interested in owning, as private shareholders, a piece of the commercial television pie, like any other commercial participants in a private business.

It would be a comfort perhaps to romantics who tend to regard Aboriginal culture as a static entity, immune from change, located forever in some timeless never-never land, to believe that Aboriginals have rejected the 'evils' of global television and banned the intrusion of such spiritually impure rubbish from their communities. Most people, including Aboriginal people, aren't like that. Aboriginal kids love Kung Fu movies, and Michael Jackson clips even if they can't understand the lyrics. The local football team in every Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory is glued to the TV screen when the grand final is telecast live from the city, and everyone is intrigued by news stories featuring indigenous peoples from other countries. This is not to say, however, that Aboriginal people living in remote communities have little interest in locally made television programmes. On the contrary,

anything featuring local news, local cultural events, community concerts or even coverage of local council meetings is as eagerly watched as programmes made in Hollywood.

The available evidence seems to indicate that when television of a 'global' nature becomes available in a community populated by indigenous people or minorities, it rapidly assumes a substantial physical presence, in one form or another, in the day-to-day life of that community. It would appear that the activity of television viewing is as seductive for indigenous peoples as it is for those in the developed world. The problem here of course is that global television, by its very nature, requires an endless stream of programming to satisfy its viewers, and in the main it is the developed world that has the technical and economic clout to produce the vast amounts of material required to feed this global monster. Inevitably, however, the viewers in the developed world will almost always watch forms of television produced within their own cultural milieu, while viewers located at the outer limits of the global networks, the Pintupi for instance, will see a world that bears almost no relation to their own.

I want here to examine the various forms of Aboriginal television which have evolved in Australia over the last decade (1980–90). I am also interested in looking at how Aboriginal people have attempted to create or 'invent' their own television through a process of 'negotiation' with the settler nation, and how this kind of inter-cultural bargaining has in itself influenced, in quite profound ways, the emergence and nature of these varied television services. I have limited myself to discussion of Aboriginal-controlled television services, and omitted detailed reference to the production and distribution of Aboriginal television programming through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or the Special Broadcasting Service (both national, European-controlled TV stations).

### Contemporary Aboriginal culture

Casual observers often make the mistake of seeing the Aboriginal community or 'nation' as an unchanging social order, free of any internal differences or conflicts. Nothing could be further from the truth. The 'Aboriginal nation' as such is an extremely complex entity, containing many internal variations. Millions of individuals regard themselves as European, for example, but will also recognise that other Europeans speak different languages, hold divergent political opinions, or live in varying social circumstances. The same applies to the Aboriginal

'nation' within Australia. Indeed, the Aboriginal population probably represents the most diverse single community of people in the country. Over a hundred Aboriginal languages are still spoken, of which twenty or so survive in a healthy, robust state. Some Aboriginal people, such as the Pintupi, first came into contact with non-Aboriginals as recently as 1984, while others, living in Sydney for instance, have a contact history stretching back over eight generations. In the political arena too there are Aboriginal factions both on the extreme right and the far left. Aboriginal fundamentalist Christians live side by side with groups that maintain traditional religious beliefs, and as in any social grouping there are also relatively wide social and economic differences.

While there are deep cultural commonalities connecting the 250,000 people who identify themselves as Aboriginal, it must be understood that when we talk about contemporary Aboriginal culture and therefore Aboriginal TV, we are not talking about just one thing. Discussion about any Aboriginal initiative invariably pulls in a whole raft of issues, from the meaning of 'Aboriginality' (pan-Aboriginalist vs. federationist or localised ideologies) through to the hidden agendas behind the concept of 'Aboriginal self-determination' (the generic term applied to official federal government policy on Aboriginals). The inclination to extend the examination of a particular issue about Aboriginals into a broad discussion about everything Aboriginal is due, I think, to the deep uncertainties and confusion about what it is to be Aboriginal (from both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspective). It seems that Aboriginal people suffer from a constant identity crisis, so that 'contemporary Aboriginal culture' is always being reinvented. The unfortunate consequences of this can be seen in places like Alice Springs, where Aboriginal unemployment, alcoholism and violence remain a regular feature of local life. Obviously all peoples, whether they be Australian Aboriginals or white middle-class Americans, live in social and cultural environments that are (and always have been) 'emergent' or in constant states of alteration, but Aboriginal culture is far more 'emergent' than most. Of course, when 98 per cent of the people living on your land are deemed to be foreigners, the pressure to change, adapt, adjust and 'emerge' is enormous, if not fundamental to your basic survival.

### The Ernabella model

Ernabella is a remote Aboriginal community located in the semi-arid regions of northern South Australia. This little community is home to approximately 550 Pitjantjatjarra people, who continue to maintain a

relatively traditional lifestyle. Pitjantjatjarra is still spoken as a first language, and ritual ceremonial activity continues to play a central role. Like the Pintupi, the Pitjantjatjarra have settled into a sedentary way of life in comparatively recent times.

Over the last ten to twenty years, the Pitjantjatjarra have fought many battles asserting their rights as an independent indigenous people. Through the Pitjantjatjarra Land Rights Act, for example, they have won secure tenure and control over their traditional lands, which encompass an area half the size of England. They run their own health service, a network of community stores, and extensive community development schemes. It is little wonder, then, that the Pitjantjatjarra at Ernabella were prepared for the arrival of satellite-delivered television, and aware of the impact this event might have on their local languages and culture. At a Pitjantjatjarra Council meeting held near Ernabella in 1983, a prominent member of the community, Anmanari Nyaningu, said, 'Unimpeded satellite transmission in our communities will be like having hundreds of whitefellas visit without permits every day.'

Past experiences with 'whitefella' media seem to have alerted the Pitjantjatjarra to what they might expect from the satellite. Videocassettes, for example, had slowly found their way into their communities. Many people were concerned about the alien social values portrayed in such video programmes and the effects this had on young Pitjantjatjarra viewers. Once the satellite became operational, similar programmes would be available on a twenty-four hour basis and have an even greater corrosive effect. There were already problems with the younger generation with regard to respect for traditional authority structures and laws governing social behaviour, and it was felt that the satellite would hasten the process of social disintegration. They knew also that archival material on film and video, of secret-sacred ceremonies, had often been shown publicly by white film-makers. The introduction of satellite television would increase the likelihood of this happening. For these and many other reasons, the Pitjantjatjarra at Ernabella decided to establish a media committee to monitor developments with the satellite, and initiated what became known as the Ernabella Video Project.

The Video Project began in 1983, with the simple aim of producing local video programmes that would reflect the interests and activities of the Ernabella community. The programmes were to be presented only in Pitjantjatjarra. When these locally made programmes were released on videocassette and distributed throughout Ernabella, there was an

enormous response. Everyone, it seemed, wanted their particular event or story recorded so that it could be seen and enjoyed by the whole community. Soon other Pitjantjatjarra communities were asking that the video crew from Ernabella come and make similar programmes in their respective local areas. Over a period of a few months, the Video Project began to assume a powerful momentum of its own, becoming the *de facto* television channel of the Pitjantjatjarra people.

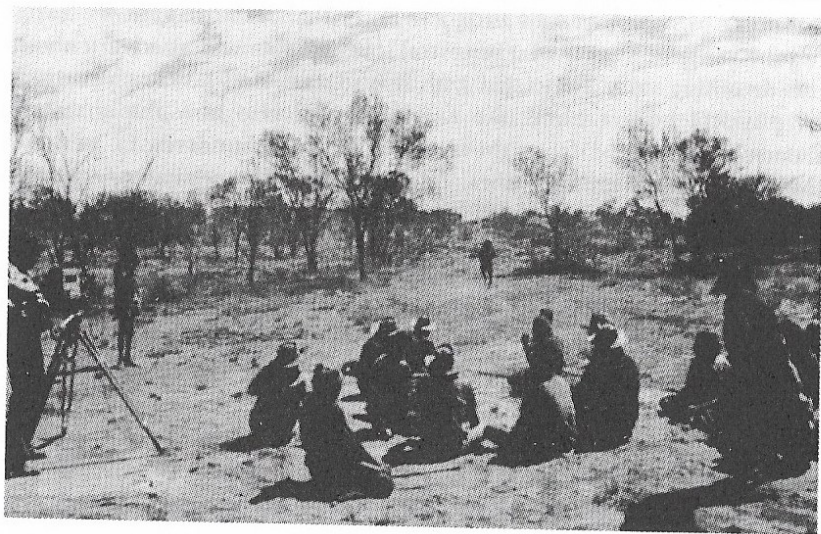
Initially, events of a communal nature were recorded, such as sporting activities, music concerts, council meetings, bush trips and community work projects. But gradually the video crew began to record material of a more cultural nature. Women asked that video programmes be made about local bush foods and medicinal plants so that their children could learn about them and the tapes could be stored for later reference. Eventually, the Ernabella Video Project developed into an organisation: Ernabella Video and Television. And ETV, as it came to be known, gradually assumed a pivotal role in the cultural life of the Pitjantjatjarra.

Those familiar with traditional Australian Aboriginal beliefs will be aware of the concept of the 'dreaming line' or, as Bruce Chatwin would have it, the 'song line'. These terms refer to journeys taken by mythic ancestors during the 'dreamtime' over particular tracks of land. These paths or tracks are delineated by actual physical features such as an outcrop of rocks, a creek, a mountain, a water-hole or a cave. All such features were created by the mythic ancestors as they travelled through the land. Associated with each journey there is a song 'cycle', made up of hundreds of verses, as well as dances and ritual performances. By learning the song for a particular ancestral journey, one will also learn about the 'dreaming story' associated with that journey and how each particular physical feature came into existence, and also how the ancestors themselves emerged from the earth. There are hundreds or perhaps thousands of dreaming lines criss-crossing Pitjantjatjarra country. Acquiring a knowledge of these lines is fundamental to Pitjantjatjarra religious understanding and takes a lifetime of patient learning. Unfortunately, since they abandoned a nomadic life the Pitjantjatjarra do not travel over their country as much as they used to do and it is therefore difficult to pass on to the younger generation a full appreciation of the dreaming lines. Through the judicious use of video equipment, however, these dreaming lines and their physical manifestations, along with the associated songs and dances, can be recorded on tape and stored back at the community. Such recordings can then be used in instructing young men and women in the ways of the ancestors.

The recording of significant dreaming lines became one of the major preoccupations of Ernabella Video and Television, and the central reason that EVTV came to assume such importance in the eyes of the Pitjantjatjarra. According to Neil Turner, media co-ordinator with EVTV:

Most significant [productions] have been the cross-country expeditions organised with up to thirty custodians of *Tjukurrpa* (dreaming) from several communities, for several days at a time to tell and re-enact Dreaming Stories and perform the song and dance for each successive site on video.... We have completed the shooting of the entire *Kungkarangkalpa* (seven sisters' dreaming) line as it traverses the Pitjantjatjarra lands ... over a hundred kilometres of spinafex and dune country.... The custodians have found video a particularly apt tool for recording the unique and integral combination of story, song, dance and visual arts and landscape through which the *Tjukurrpa* is expressed ... as it can be entirely directed, produced, and distributed by themselves, without the expertise of literate white anthropologists.<sup>2</sup>

*EVTV filming traditional dance at a sacred site in the Central Australian desert,*  
© CAAMA



Such was the local interest in the use of video to record the dreaming lines that EVTV produced, over a relatively short time, close to a thousand hours of footage which was roughly edited and subsequently multi-copied onto cassette and distributed throughout the Pitjantjatjarra lands. This process had the effect of engendering a kind of local renaissance in traditional dance, performance and singing. The various video programmes depicting the actual land where the dreaming lines were located gave renewed strength to traditional beliefs and values within the communities. This in turn led to EVTV hosting a number of traditional dance festivals at Ernabella, and the organisation of performances throughout Australia.

Apart from the recording of traditional activities, EVTV had always planned to establish a local television broadcasting station, on an experimental basis, at Ernabella. The major obstacle was funding. EVTV had been advised that even a small, low-powered TV transmitter would cost \$20,000 or more. While there were government funding bodies that could supply such financial assistance, all were reluctant to support what would in effect be an unlicensed television station and therefore an illegal project. Undaunted, EVTV sought the assistance of a local amateur electronics enthusiast who could install a basic TV transmitter, made from second-hand parts, for \$1,000. In order to raise the required cash, the community store agreed to place a surcharge of 10 cents on all soft drinks sales. The money was available in a matter of months. In April 1985, the world's cheapest TV station went on air from the studios of Ernabella Video and Television, to the delight of the local community.

The station was managed on a relatively strict basis by the local media committee, made up almost entirely of older, traditional Aboriginal people. It was switched off during the weekends, so that television viewing did not interfere with the social activities of the community, and during funerals and council meetings. Initial broadcasting hours were between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. four nights per week. Programming consisted of a mix of locally made material, programmes made by other Aboriginal media organisations, and material relating to Aboriginal issues recorded off regular TV services such as the ABC. The local school began to run a weekly educational programme and there were some 'live' performances from the Ernabella Choir and other local musical groups. The station even ran an 'Aid for Africa' appeal and raised \$1,600 from local viewers.

A year or so after local television transmission at Ernabella began, the national satellite AUSSAT was launched and began beaming

the national television service, the ABC, into every remote corner of the nation. At this point EVTV decided to purchase a satellite receiving dish (from the sale of videos) so that it could take material off satellite and rebroadcast such programmes on a selective basis as part of their nightly programme mix. The media committee felt that EVTV had gained substantial experience in managing a television service through the operation of their local TV station, and had shown members of the local community how television was controllable, and how it need not be an overpowering force. The committee now felt that it could patch together a local television service drawing on a variety of sources, including a substantial selection of their own locally produced material.

Today, Ernabella continues to operate a locally controlled television service, broadcasting a selection of programming composed of satellite feeds (from both commercial and public sources) and locally made programmes. It also continues to produce a seemingly endless stream of video programmes based on traditional activities, which are sold on a regular basis throughout the Pitjantjatjarra lands and beyond. Despite perennial funding problems and limited production resources, Ernabella Video and Television have managed to use television technologies in productive and genuinely beneficial ways, and indeed have been able to incorporate such technologies into their local culture in ways appropriate to themselves. Beyond this, I think it can be shown that the Pitjantjatjarra at Ernabella found ways of using television technology for their own cultural purposes which were very different from Western mass media practices. For example, secret-sacred ceremonies of both women and men continue to be recorded on video for private purposes and not for broadcast. One of the interesting aspects of the approach taken by the people at Ernabella was that they did not reject television outright; in fact they embraced it wholeheartedly. They had managed to establish their own local television service, funded through their own local resources, and became familiar with the basic processes of production long before the arrival of television via satellite.

There are important lessons to be learned here. Firstly, if the community had taken a completely oppositional approach to the introduction of television into their community (in other words, had banned it) and had not established their own local TV station and local production techniques on their own terms, then it is almost certain that they would not, as a community, have been able to deal with the introduction of

direct satellite television in an experienced and informed way. When satellite television became available in most other remote Aboriginal communities where there was no previous experience with television, there was neither local ability to control the influx of external television nor the technical understanding needed to produce local programming. 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 by applying that knowledge in locally relevant and significant ways.

Secondly, the people at Ernabella established local TV and production facilities using relatively low-tech, cheap and easy to use equipment. In other words, they were able to develop a kind of local 'television culture' using technologies that could be rapidly learnt and applied to local conditions. There have been so many development projects initiated in Aboriginal communities that have failed because of the complex technologies employed. In such projects, outside 'experts' and technicians are required to operate equipment and manage the associated administrative structures that invariably hamper involvement by the local people. In this case, however, the TV project was largely initiated and controlled, in both a technical and an administrative sense, by the local people.

Thirdly, most of the initial funding for these developments was generated by the Ernabella community itself and not provided through the often constraining avenue of government funding. Indeed, they would not have been able to establish a local TV station at all if it had been funded through government money; without a television licence, no government would have provided assistance to set up what amounted to an illegal TV channel. Finally, the Pitjantjatjarra, unlike the majority of Aboriginal people, live in an environment where they are in the majority: they have relatively secure tenure of their land, a strong connection to their traditional cultural base, and adequate support services in place. While they continue to suffer from a wide range of health, housing and educational problems, the Pitjantjatjarra are nevertheless in a politically strong position compared with other Aboriginal people. This ability to call at least some of the shots certainly had an influence on the successful development of locally controlled television services at Ernabella. As we shall see, in other rural or urban settings where Aboriginal people are in the minority, and so have to conform to the vagaries of government policy to a much greater extent, the effort to establish Aboriginal television services has not been so successful.

### The Broadcasting in Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS)

The BRACS service grew out of a federal government report entitled *Out of the Silent Land*, commissioned by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1985 to assess and make recommendations on Aboriginal broadcasting.<sup>3</sup> The authors of the report modelled their concept of the BRACS system on the experiments at Ernabella and the activities of the Walpiri Media Association at Yuendumu, which have been well documented by Eric Michaels.<sup>4</sup>

In technical terms, a BRACS station is capable of picking up commercial and national signals (radio and television) off the domestic satellite, AUSSAT, and rebroadcasting them in a selective manner (or not at all) into the local community via low-powered transmitters. The BRACS system can also be used for the production of limited, low-budget local radio and television programmes. At the time of writing there were twenty-eight BRACS facilities operating throughout the Northern Territory.

While the intentions of the federal government (to provide local communities with a measure of control over incoming television and radio services) are to be commended, the effectiveness of the BRACS system at the community level has not been an unqualified success – and some would say it has been a fiasco. It appears that with a few notable exceptions these facilities are used mainly as a means simply to rebroadcast outside television programming within the communities, rather than as a device to broadcast a mix of local and incoming material, as originally intended. The government facilitators of the BRACS system did not appear to have any realistic notion of the time-consuming effort required to produce television programming (even using low-budget, domestic-standard equipment), or of the basic administrative infrastructure required to manage a BRACS system, which is in effect a small-scale television station. In most cases, the BRACS facilities were installed in communities without proper consultation. In some instances, the actual physical control of the BRACS facilities (possession of the key to the equipment shed, for instance), ended up with the white local teacher or the policeman's wife!

The various elements that made the experiment in locally controlled TV at Ernabella work were, in nearly all respects, missing in those communities where BRACS facilities were installed. The notion of a locally controlled TV station did not emerge from these communities as a particular issue of concern to the local people themselves; there was no training, or development of a community consciousness about televi-

sion, prior to BRACS being installed; there was not the basic administrative structure required to operate a community TV station, or the skills needed to produce programming. Typically, it was an initiative based on a policy developed according to the experience of one or two Aboriginal communities in Central Australia (Ernabella and Yuendumu). This policy was then applied across the board to many other locations, far from central Australia, all with very different local concerns and experiences. Regardless of these current difficulties with the BRACS facilities, I think it can be said that the successful development of Aboriginal television services in remote Aboriginal communities, even through BRACS, is a far more likely proposition than in rural or urban situations where Aboriginal people are invariably in a minority, and therefore must compete and negotiate to a much greater degree with the dominant non-Aboriginal population for access or control over available television and radio services.

### Negotiating an Aboriginal television licence

When the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) set out in 1985 to intervene in the introduction of satellite television services in the Northern Territory, it had not envisaged owning and operating a commercial television service. CAAMA only wanted to gain access to the new satellite system in order to provide culturally appropriate TV programming to the substantial Aboriginal population within its region. But after a long and heavily contested negotiation process, CAAMA in fact became the major shareholder in *Imparja Television*, a private company created to hold and operate the central Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS) television licence, and suddenly became responsible for providing a commercial TV service across a third of the Australian landmass, an area the size of Western Europe. The following is a brief description of events that led up to these extraordinary developments.

A group of Aboriginal and white people, including myself, had set up CAAMA in 1980, initially to produce and broadcast radio programmes in Aboriginal languages using the facilities of the local commercial radio station in Alice Springs. In 1981, we became aware of plans by the federal government to introduce direct broadcast satellite (DBS) television services to the remote regions of Australia. There were to be four discrete satellite footprints, technically capable of distributing a range of telecommunication services, including television and radio, to anywhere in Australia. One of these satellite footprints (the central zone)

would cover all of the Northern Territory and South Australia. CAAMA was immediately concerned about the potential effects of foreign television on the many hundreds of traditional Aboriginal communities located throughout the proposed central footprint area, most of which had no radio, television or telephone services, let alone direct satellite facilities.

CAAMA felt strongly that the Aboriginal people living within the central footprint area should have a fundamental involvement in the new satellite services, for a number of reasons. In a submission to the then federal Department of Communications, CAAMA demonstrated that the Aboriginal population within the central footprint was substantial. At the time, it was almost 40 per cent of the total proposed audience – on the basis of demographics alone, wide Aboriginal involvement was indicated. The main arguments for Aboriginal participation centred on concerns about the potential effects of unimpeded television on traditional Aboriginal life. For example, CAAMA pointed out that 90 per cent of the Aboriginal languages spoken throughout Australia had been rendered extinct in the relatively brief period (200 years) of European colonisation, and all the remaining 10 per cent were located in the areas where the new satellite services were to be introduced. Ceremonial life, social structures and traditional values were also felt to be under threat. Apart from the potentially negative effects of the satellite, CAAMA also believed that it could be used to advantage, particularly in the field of Aboriginal education.

When CAAMA presented its 1981 submission to the federal government, plans for the actual technical configuration of the satellite had not been finalised, so it argued that the satellite should be engineered in a way that would allow non-profit organisations some access to the new technology and should not be entirely dominated by commercial television operators. Sadly, such arguments were never considered by the authorities.

At this point, the Australian government was under the spell of economic rationalism and believed that free enterprise could solve any conceivable problem. They decided that the satellite transponders set aside for non-government television broadcasting, in the four footprint zones, should be licensed to commercial television companies only, and that if anyone else wanted to use these transponders they would have to work out a deal with the successful commercial licensee. Indeed, these four transponders would operate what would become known as the Remote Commercial Television Services (RCTS). This meant that commercial interests would have a large measure of control over all non-govern-

ment television, educational services, data distribution systems, community telecommunications and medical communications services. In late 1984, the Minister for Communications invited interested companies to apply for the licences to operate such services.

The government's decision to hand over control of the RCTS to commercial interests presented CAAMA with a real dilemma. Should it wait until a private company was given the licence, then ask for some airtime and hope for a favourable response? Or should CAAMA take the plunge and apply for the licence itself? Some argued that CAAMA's integrity and purpose as an independent Aboriginal media organisation would be distorted beyond recognition if it engaged in the operation of a commercial TV station; that it would necessarily have to become to some degree commercial in outlook, and would most likely be forced into making compromises that could undermine the very reasons for intervening in the television licensing process. Others felt that if CAAMA did not at least attempt to acquire the RCTS licence, it would never get another chance of gaining some control over the satellite. As the closing date for the submission of applications grew nearer, CAAMA finally decided to apply.

In a sense, debate about whether CAAMA should have gone for the licence or not was somewhat academic. First, it had no money, even though \$6m would be needed just to buy the equipment to run the new service. Secondly, it had no expertise, even though direct satellite television is an extremely complex piece of technology and had never been tried in Australia before. To make things worse, all financial projections seemed to indicate that no matter who operated the central RCTS, it would never be able to support itself on a commercial basis. Nevertheless, with the assistance of hired consultants, CAAMA very quickly put together an impressive licence application (in two volumes). It also created a commercial company, known as *Imparja Television Pty. Ltd.*, as the vehicle for the licence application. While various funding bodies were approached for funds, they were slow to make any real commitment. The only strength that CAAMA had was in its programming proposals. Here it outlined a comprehensive and innovative plan to broadcast a wide range of television programming that would reflect the diversity of the audience within the central RCTS service area. Although commercial programming was included as part of the total programming mix, CAAMA proposed a high level of weekly Aboriginal programming, presented in the Aboriginal languages of the region, by and for Aboriginal people.

The only other applicant for the licence was Television Capricornia, a company owned by an existing commercial television station, NTD8, located in Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory. NTD8's application was in most respects a reverse of CAAMA's. They seemed to have the financial backing and the experience to implement the new service but did not plan to develop any new or appropriate programming; instead they proposed to use their existing commercial programming, making a few minor changes to the local news. Their application did not include any plans for Aboriginal programming.

The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) convened a hearing in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, in August 1985 to consider the licence applications. The hearing lasted for almost two weeks. CAAMA, realising that this might be the only opportunity it would get to air its views about Aboriginal involvement in the proposed new satellite, whether it won the licence or not, presented twenty-four witnesses, most of them traditional Aboriginal people from remote communities in central Australia. Much of CAAMA's evidence centred round the need for appropriate television programming for the new service, and the impact that ill-conceived programming might have on traditional Aboriginal cultures located in the remote communities within the proposed new television service area.

No one was more surprised than CAAMA when, towards the end of 1985, the ABT released its report on the hearing and concluded that, 'neither applicant qualifies for the licence. The Tribunal [has] serious reservations about the financial capability of the Imparja [CAAMA] application and doubts as to whether the service proposed by Television Capricornia [NTD8] would be adequate having regard to all the circumstances and characteristics of the area to be served.'<sup>5</sup> The Tribunal called for a further hearing to be held in March 1986, again in Alice Springs. There was now a real prospect of CAAMA becoming the owner and operator of a commercial satellite television service. Again, there was lengthy debate within CAAMA about whether the organisation really wanted to have anything to do with running a commercial business, which would inevitably involve providing a service to the more commercially attractive non-Aboriginal audience. But the momentum created by the Tribunal's decision proved to be an irresistible force, and CAAMA decided to prepare for the second hearing in earnest.

In effect, the Tribunal sent both applicants out on a treasure hunt: CAAMA had to find \$6m and NTD8 some Aboriginal programming proposals, all in six months. Fortunately for CAAMA, the federal gov-

ernment had just created the Australian Bi-Centennial Authority (ABA), an organisation charged with the task of co-ordinating the celebration of 200 years of white colonisation. The ABA was given a substantial budget to fund the celebrations, and of course quite a lot of money was set aside for Aboriginal groups. Financing an Aboriginal television station appeared to be just the right antidote for two centuries of white guilt. A lengthy submission, asking for \$2.5 million, was presented to the ABA, and a further \$1.8 million was approved by the Aboriginal Development Commission, a body set up to provide government funding to Aboriginal enterprises. An extra \$2.0 million was sought from the federal Education Department to underwrite educational programme production. It seemed that CAAMA could go back to the Tribunal with the required cash, even though only one lot of funding had been approved. Meanwhile NTD8 had managed to acquire the services of a group called United Australian Television to provide the Aboriginal programming required by the Tribunal.

The Tribunal hearings were duly reconvened in March 1986 and lasted for four days. When the hearings opened CAAMA had still not received confirmation of the ABA's funding, but it was received during the hearings in a telex from the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. The Education Department funding did not, however, materialise. In the end CAAMA had managed to scrape together \$4.3m; this was nearly \$2m short of the target, but a strong case was put forward for the likelihood of further sponsorship becoming available if it was granted the licence. NTD8, on the other hand, had not put up a very convincing case for better programming. It appeared that its consultants, United Australian Television, instead of developing a comprehensive plan for Aboriginal programming, had spent the intervening months running a campaign to discredit CAAMA's application. It had not succeeded. In August 1986, a year after the Tribunal began its hearing into the central RCTS, it concluded that the licence should be awarded to CAAMA.

The Tribunal indicated that although both applicants had satisfied the criteria to be awarded the licence,

The Imparja (CAAMA) program proposals offer an innovative development in Australian commercial television and [are] clearly based on the applicant's perception of the needs of the RCTS area... The program proposal of Capricornia (NTD8) changed considerably during the course of the enquiry and its adequacy for the Aboriginal population of the service area is debatable... The Tribunal concludes



that the Imparja programming proposals will provide a more adequate and comprehensive service than those of Capricornia ... [and] that Imparja is the most suitable, and therefore appropriate, for the grant of the licence.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly CAAMA had won the final round in the licence battle through its proposals to service the Aboriginal audience. This represented an extraordinary achievement for CAAMA and Aboriginal people in general. It had won the right, through its commercial offspring Imparja Television, to deliver both radio and television programming to every remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory and South Australia, as well as to the relatively large outback towns of Alice Springs, Catherine, Tennant Creek and Coober Pedy. Indeed, CAAMA's new broadcast service area was home to more than 60 per cent of all Aboriginal groups still living in a semi-traditional way.

#### Self-determination or self-destruction?

In 1991, six years after CAAMA's original intervention into the television licensing process, a visiting student from Nigeria came to Alice Springs to inspect Imparja. He had been told that this was the only Aboriginal-owned television station in Australia and was therefore keen to see how an indigenous group ran such a service and how it differed from mainstream stations. He was amazed to learn that the federal government had given the local Aboriginal people more than \$18m to set up and run Imparja over three years, but perplexed that the station only employed four Aboriginal people out of a total staff of thirty-two and that Imparja's programming was 98 per cent white! While Imparja is today cloaked in the rhetoric of 'Aboriginal self-determination' and is supported by many millions of 'Aboriginal dollars' provided by the government, the major beneficiaries do not appear to be Aboriginal. Over 80 per cent of the audience is non-Aboriginal, practically all the local and national businesses that take advantage of the highly subsidised commercial rates offered by Imparja are non-Aboriginal, and all senior operational management are still white.

Although CAAMA never had any intention of televising 'wall-to-wall corroborees' on Imparja, as some earlier critics believed, it did intend to produce and broadcast a moderate level of weekly programming for its Aboriginal audience in a variety of local languages. Such programmes were not to be placed in 'programming ghettos' but scheduled in normal rating periods along with the more regular commercial fare. But these

plans (which so impressed the Tribunal) have not come to fruition. During the whole of 1991 only six and a half hours of programming in Aboriginal languages were transmitted. Ironically, one of the other RCTS operators (GWN in Western Australia), which is owned by commercial interests, manages to broadcast on a community service basis far more Aboriginal programming than Imparja. Equally ironically, Imparja is now no different from its rival for the licence, NTD8. The management of both stations is white, the primary aim is to be commercially successful, they even buy their programming from the same source.

Freda Glynn, an Aboriginal woman of considerable experience in the field of Aboriginal development, was the co-founder and Director of CAAMA (from 1980 to 1991) and the chairperson of Imparja for the first three years of its existence. She resigned from both organisations in late 1991, as I did, largely as a result of internal disagreements over the way Imparja was being managed and the general direction in which the station was heading. Ms Glynn is now disillusioned:

Our original aim was to get some control over the satellite so that we could use it to suit our own purposes.... I remember saying that television was like the second invasion of our country, that it would be just as destructive as alcohol.... We wanted to see a lot of black faces, people speaking our local languages.... We were especially interested in using it for educational purposes.... Maybe this can still happen... but look at Imparja now, it's no different to any other commercial TV station.... In a way, it has become what we tried to stop.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that Imparja represents an example of how government policy towards Aboriginal people, while apparently designed to encourage them to manage their own affairs, has actually worked both to defuse any genuine notions of 'self-determination' and, more distressingly, to deny Aboriginal claims to a separate cultural identity.

On the one hand, the Federal government has a generally stated commitment to the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination, and through the ABT's decision in favour of CAAMA's application recognised the specific need for Aboriginal control over the introduction of satellite television in the area. On the other hand, its rejection of CAAMA's initial arguments for non-profit access to the satellite, combined with its decision to award licences only to commercial TV companies, effectively forced CAAMA/Imparja into the global television



Simon Tjiyanu of EVTv setting up a shot, © CAAMA

market-place. The realities of this market-place mean that it costs Imparja about twenty times less to buy top-rating international TV shows than it does to commission their own Aboriginal programming, and the (white) advertisers whose money supports the station are obviously keen to reach the more affluent (again, mainly white) audiences who watch the top-rating shows. In these circumstances it is not difficult to see why CAAMA has been unable to create its own form of television. Instead, Aboriginal people were simply given the right to 'own' a small piece of the established global television pie.

Unfortunately, it must also be pointed out that there were some people within Imparja who were more than willing to allow it to become just another commercial television station in line with government expectations. Indeed, the current management of Imparja has stated that Imparja cannot, in any real sense, be classified as an 'Aboriginal television service'; rather, it is first and foremost a commer-

cial business, with obligations under its licence to serve all viewers. The fact that it is owned exclusively by Aboriginal interests is of no consequence: 'All sorts of people own commercial television stations'.<sup>8</sup>

It might be worth noting that another operation established by CAAMA, the radio broadcasting network 8KIN, has proved to be a success. 8KIN goes on air via satellite over the same area as Imparja and has a devoted following in the footprint's Aboriginal communities. Sixty per cent of its spoken material is in local Aboriginal languages and the station's staff are all Aboriginal. There is no space here to analyse why 8KIN has succeeded and Imparja failed. I mention 8KIN simply to draw attention to the fact that, given the right circumstances, indigenous groups can utilise the relatively sophisticated technology of satellites to their advantage.

Aboriginal people must be in a position to use such new technologies in ways relevant and acceptable to themselves. The Pitjantjatjarra people at Ernabella demonstrated that it is indeed possible for indigenous groups to negotiate successfully, in both a technical and a cultural sense, the introduction of television into their lives. On the other hand, CAAMA's attempt to conduct similar 'negotiations' (on a much larger scale of course) to establish Imparja ultimately failed, largely because their right to develop such a service in ways appropriate to themselves was not properly acknowledged.

It is only in relatively recent times that the industrialised West has come to haunt almost every corner of the globe. Very few people today remain unaware of or free from the influence of the all-pervasive juggernaut of Western culture. It is encouraging, then, that some groups at least have been able to meet this global force head-on, and to produce as a result new and powerful forms of television which are uniquely their own.

#### NOTES

1. Neil Turner, 'Pitchat and Beyond', *Artlink* (Adelaide), vol. 10 no. 1-2, 1990, p. 44.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
3. Department of Aboriginal Affairs, *Out of the Silent Land* (Canberra: A.G.P.S., 1986).
4. Eric Michaels, *The Aboriginal Invention of Television* (Canberra: A.I.A.T.S.I.S., 1986).
5. Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *Remote Commercial Television Services Fourth Report Central Region* (Canberra: A.G.P.S., 1986), p. 172.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
7. Personal communication.
8. *Ibid.*