

# ‘THE POTENTIAL DIVERSITY OF THINGS WE CALL TV’: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY TELEVISION, SELF-DETERMINATION AND NITV

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## Abstract

*The National Indigenous Television (NITV) service was launched in July 2007. NITV's public service broadcasting model has arrived after two decades of successful community-based enterprise. Indigenous groups, guided by policies of self-determination, developed a robust grassroots media system based on community ownership and regional collaboration. The arrival of NITV raised important questions for the sector. Can locally sourced content provide the levels of leadership and national unity achieved by public service media during the broadcast era? How can Indigenous media play a greater role in the Australian public sphere? Can locally controlled media offer national narratives? Where does industry development begin and end? As the Indigenous media sector faces up to these issues, two distinct approaches are emerging. One presents a unified picture of Indigenous Australia; the other enables diverse groups to tell their own stories. This paper examines the tensions and possibilities of the new Indigenous media landscape by looking back at the self-determination governance model of the past.*

## Introduction

‘The Aboriginal invention of television’ (Michaels, 1986) has been studied for its unique production methods and distribution systems, designed to suit remote Indigenous communities’ cultural practices and geographic conditions. Over two decades, remote groups developed a complex broadcasting system based on local control, regional networking and cross-platform production. By 2005, around 300 hours a year of original content were being transmitted on Imparja’s second satellite channel, produced and collated by remote media organisations. The service was called Indigenous Community Television (ICTV).

In September 2005, the Howard government allocated \$48.5 million over four years to establish a national Indigenous television service. The money was not given to ICTV but to a new entity, National Indigenous Television (NITV), although it did not receive a separate channel. This meant the new service was expected to use existing Indigenous media infrastructure and distribution channels. The remote ICTV service had to vacate the satellite channel it had been using since 2001 to make way for NITV. NITV signifies a new era in Indigenous communications. In

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the first part of this paper, we outline the events leading up to the establishment of ICTV and NITV. In the second part, we discuss how NITV has brought to the surface two distinct ideologies concerning Indigenous cultural needs. The differences are historically embedded, and caught up in unresolved social and political issues about the governance of Indigenous Australia.

In the third part, we touch upon what the arrival of a third public service broadcaster (PSB) — albeit a compromised one — means for the future of the Australian media. The Howard government endorsed and resourced an old-fashioned PSB model at a time when grassroots, user-generated media was on the ascendancy across the media at large. We ask how has this occurred and whether it can succeed.

## Looking back

### The history of ICTV

ICTV was the culmination of two decades of video production and broadcasting in remote Australia. The first autonomous Indigenous television services appeared in the remote communities of Yuendumu (Tanami Desert) and Pukatja (formerly Ernabella, SA) in the mid-1980s. As Molnar and Meadows (2001) have pointed out, policy has generally followed rather than led Indigenous media innovation. The emergence of these two television stations — unlicensed and totally different to anything else around — put pressure on the government to develop a framework for remote Indigenous media. Compact all-in-one radio and television units named BRACS (Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme) units were devised following the 1984 *Out of the Silent Land* report. This technology allowed communities to control the content received from the satellite and gave them the means to produce and broadcast local programs, using a hand-held video camera, a radio microphone, a cassette-deck and low-power radio and television transmitters. Between 1987 and 1996, 103 remote communities received BRACS equipment. What BRACS didn't provide was administrative support, training or even infrastructure to house the units. From 1993, eight remote Indigenous media organisations (RIMOs) were established and funded under the BRACS Revitalisation Scheme to upgrade and maintain equipment, pay and train workers, and provide other forms of support. It was these groups that were eventually instrumental in establishing ICTV. In addition, five radio networks (CAAMA, PAKAM, TEABBA, 5NPY and PAW) were created for distribution via the new Aurora satellite service and local retransmission to communities within five remote regions. Following the termination of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2003, responsibility for Indigenous media moved to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA). The Indigenous Broadcasting Program (IBP) within DCITA provided direct funding for Indigenous community radio broadcasting, regional and peak bodies, content production, media training and assistance to the satellite service Imparja (see below). When Labor came to power in late 2007, the IBP was moved to the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.

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The Indigenous media sector pursued commercial possibilities from the start. In 1986 the not-for-profit media organisation, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), formed a fully Aboriginal-owned commercial company, Imparja, to bid for a Remote Commercial Television Service licence. The licence was one of four offered to serve different geographic areas corresponding to the footprints of the zonal beams of the new domestic satellite system, AUSSAT. Despite having no commercial television experience, Imparja won a licence by convincing the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal of the potentially disastrous impact of satellite-delivered commercial television on remote cultures. In 1988, it commenced a full-time television service for the remote Northern Territory and South Australia footprint, where over 30 per cent of the potential audience was Indigenous. In the late 1990s, Imparja moved to digital technology on the Optus (which acquired AUSSAT) Aurora satellite and its licence area was expanded to include remote Queensland and large areas of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. However, the commercial model was not entirely successful at meeting its intended Indigenous programming output. Due to financial constraints, Imparja to this day screens very little Indigenous content on its commercial television service, which takes much of its programming from Networks Nine and Ten.

In the meantime, the not-for-profit Indigenous media sector continued to grow. BRACS facilities were used to produce and broadcast programs within individual communities, but the broadcast of programs from other communities was rare. From 1999 the annual BRACS (now Remote Media) Festival showcased some of the hundreds of videos being produced by communities each year, but there was no system to screen all this content in BRACS communities themselves. Imparja's Tim Mason came up with a solution, reconfiguring the satellite capacity to create a second channel, which he called Channel 31. The RIMOs were invited to begin test broadcasts using Imparja's second satellite channel with content from Warlpiri Media, PY Media and PAKAM, and supported by Imparja TV and the sector's peak body, the National Indigenous Media Association of Australia (NIMAA). Households in a number of remote communities were able to receive the channel as broadcast free-to-air television as it was retransmitted using the BRACS equipment. The arrangement suited both parties: the communities benefited from Imparja's annual subsidy of approximately \$2 million, paid through the IBP to maintain its satellite transmission; Imparja benefited from the communities because 80 per cent of the content supplied for the second satellite channel was in Indigenous languages, enabling Imparja to fulfil its Indigenous content obligations.

In May 1999, Warlpiri Media Association coordinator Tom Kantor wrote a draft policy paper for NIMAA's BRACS Working Party outlining a proposal for a national remote Indigenous community television service:

Through a coast-to-coast community driven service we will share our voice and our vision ... Through a nationwide television channel dedicated to Indigenous communities, we will lead the way to a ground breaking service that all the sectors of our Industry will become a part of. With take up in urban centres (and the ensuing program contribution) this project is truly

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forward looking. In effect we will end up providing a national Indigenous television station. (Kantor, 1999)

The proposal solved many of the BRACS problems: it provided incentive for local production, addressed how video tapes would be compiled and distributed for local broadcast, and suggested a dedicated receiver and transmitter for the service.

The pilot broadcasts became the foundation of ICTV. Imparja's first broadcast using the second satellite channel occurred in September 1999, when two hours of material produced by BRACS stations across Australia went to air. This 'first attempt at establishing a national Indigenous television service in Australia', according to Molnar and Meadows (2001), had 'the potential to be a model for distributing a diverse range of Indigenous television content' (2001: 57).

When the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) was formed in 2001 (and NIMAA folded), its major aims included establishing ICTV and a dedicated receiver and transmitter for each community.

PY Media began broadcasting weekend football games from Alice Springs back to Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara communities in the 2001–02 season. This was followed by a few hours of compiled videos from the Remote Video festival and locally produced programs from PY Media (Rikina Video Show) and Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media. In 2002, Warlpiri (now PAW) Media and Ngaanyatjarra Media also started contributing tapes or hard drives and sending them to Imparja for playout. The groups decided to try to put together a regular programming schedule, even though there was no specific funding available for it. Programs were mostly produced as part of BRACS (now Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services, RIBS) media training and community productions or sponsored videos. Local festivals and events, sports carnivals, cultural dance performances, meetings, bush trips, training videos, health and educational promotions, school trips and music videos made up the bulk of the schedule. By 2003, the program had become a daily playout under the name 'IRCA in Action'. Initially this involved each of the remote media organisations sending videos to Imparja for ingesting and transmission.

In 2004, IRCA sought funding for a fully automated playout system for an Indigenous Community Television Service. A playout computer was set up at the PY Media office in Alice Springs and began transmitting the eight-hour playlist of Quicktime movies to Imparja via a relay link. Later, a second eight-hour program was compiled and the two programs alternated daily. Both were refreshed monthly with new programming. Imparja also began broadcasting other programs from 5.30–9.00 p.m. including a rural affairs program, *Bush Vision*, *Action Sports* and, by 2006, programs from CAAMA Productions and Goolarri Media. In total, ICTV was transmitting for more than 20 hours each day. Apart from the recurrent funding already being provided to RIMOs through IBP that enabled them to produce video content (estimated at around \$390 000 a year), the national ICTV service was costing the federal government a total of only \$75 000 in aggregation and playout costs during its final year of operation (via the IBP).

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Initially, the dedicated ICTV receivers and transmitters that IRCA wanted for each community were not available. Most communities used their BRACS transmitters and single-channel community TV licences to broadcast ABC TV. PY Media had developed a switching system, whereby a pulse signal over the satellite automatically triggered the channel to switch from ABC to ICTV between 9.00 a.m. and 5.30 p.m. In 2005, following a concerted effort by IRCA and the RIMOs, DCITA set up a \$2 million infrastructure plan to provide dedicated transmitters at up to 80 RIBS sites to retransmit the ICTV service distributed via *Imparja*'s second satellite channel (CBF, 2005). The program was managed by the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF). DCITA badged it the 'RIBS TV Transmitter Rollout'. However, it was requested and initially funded for the purpose of broadcasting the ICTV service.

The RIMOs worked closely with the CBF to stretch the funding from the 80 sites with community broadcast licences (no further community licences were allocated after the initial BRACS allocation in the mid-1990s) to provide transmitters for the ICTV service to 147 communities. These were installed from late 2005 to early 2007.

Encryption of the ICTV service was removed on 11 August 2006, making ICTV available right across the footprint of the Optus C1 satellite. This covers most of Australia, including capital cities and regional centres that have their own commercial TV services, and are therefore prevented from receiving the remote commercial TV services provided by *Imparja* and others. Authorised under the 'open narrowcasting' class licence, ICTV became available to anybody with a satellite receiver without the need for a smartcard. A much broader audience began to access the service, particularly in rural and remote areas. ICTV was incorporated in 2006. At its inaugural AGM in Balgo, Western Australia, it consolidated its role representing remote community producers and audiences, and aggregating remote television content for distribution and broadcast. Membership was open to all remote community producers, whether from a RIBS community or not.

Many remote communities had only just begun receiving the dedicated ICTV service in 2006–07, yet there was overwhelming audience support. It had sparked a resurgence in media activity in the regions, with many community members — trained and novices — wanting to make videos to screen on ICTV. As with other community television channels, there were few restrictions on production quality. The focus was self-representation, participation and the stories being shared. In a very short time, ICTV had become the primary TV service in remote communities. A study of the community media sector's audiences, conducted by Griffith University and commissioned by DCITA and CBAA, described the impact:

The advent of ICTV and its slow, steady spread across remote Australia seems to have created an extraordinary level of excitement amongst audiences in remote Indigenous communities. Wherever the community TV service was available, viewers spoke with passion and pride about the importance of seeing images of local, identifiable Indigenous people on TV

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— in many cases, for the first time. Although ICTV is performing many roles in the communities we visited — maintaining languages and cultures, connecting communities, promoting cross-cultural awareness, a source of news and information — audiences most commonly talked about it in terms of education: providing an environment where children and adults, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, could learn. (Meadows et al., 2007)

ICTV served a social purpose. Content was directly tied to community concerns about education, health, art, sport and ceremony. National issues covered by mainstream media, like business, defence and international affairs, were not addressed in any conventional sense. Community ownership resulted in content that targeted local priorities and cultural maintenance ahead of national narratives and their global context. NITV was formed to address that imbalance.

### **The development of NITV**

The initial concept of a National Indigenous Broadcasting Service was detailed in a report commissioned by ATSIC and NIMAA and prepared by Malcolm Long Associates and Owen Cole. Entitled *The Belonging Network* and released in December 2000, the report examined three organisational models for this national service: a minimalist model, where government continued to fund a range of independent Indigenous media initiatives; a public service broadcaster model similar to the ABC and SBS; and a partnership model involving collaboration between the existing Indigenous media industry and a new national entity.

Momentum for such a service built before the release of the report. The Productivity Commission's *Inquiry into Broadcasting* (2000) recommended that the government should examine the need for and feasibility of establishing an Indigenous broadcasting service. A new Object added to the *Broadcasting Services Act* (BSA) by the *BSA (Digital Television and Datacasting) Act 2000* ensured that the issue would stay on the government's agenda. The new Object was initiated by the CBAA and pushed through parliament by the Greens and Democrats:

S 3(1)(n) To ensure the maintenance and, where possible, the development of diversity, including public, community and indigenous broadcasting, in the Australian broadcasting system in the transition to digital broadcasting.

This was the first legislative recognition of Indigenous broadcasting as a distinct tier of the Australian media, separate from community broadcasting (Corker, 2007).

In May 2004, DCITA conducted a review into the viability of creating an Indigenous television service (ITV) and arrangements for future digital transmission of such a service. The following June, a summit was held in Redfern in Sydney to discuss the ITV model. A working party was formed with representatives from the IRCA, Indigenous Screen Australia, the Australian Indigenous Communications Association (AICA), Imparja Television and other industry experts. A joint industry submission was prepared by remote community producers. IRCA's representatives proposed two separate channels sharing or exchanging content, but catering to different audiences. One would be developed for remote audiences (ICTV) and one for mainstream audiences (the NITV service, described as a 'black SBS').

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The proposal for two separate channels was supported by the membership present at the time but was later dropped by the working party.

The ITV working party's submission to the government highlighted the success of ICTV as an example of audience demand and the sector's capacity to produce content and deliver a national service. The aim was to convince the government to expand the ICTV service and make it more accessible in metropolitan and regional as well as remote areas. Ideally, the sixth free-to-air channel already used by licensed community TV stations in several major cities would be allocated for a national Indigenous service established as a third public broadcaster.

The *Indigenous Television Report* put forward four options based on the review submissions. The first was to 'establish a National Indigenous Broadcaster', costing \$80 million per annum plus establishment costs. The second option was to impose additional programming responsibility on SBS (around \$6 million per annum). The third option, which resembled the Long and Cole recommendation, was to 'build on the Indigenous Community Television Service' (\$10 million per annum). The fourth option was to establish an Indigenous content fund, which would look something like SBSi (\$6 million per annum). The minister's announcement in September 2005 favoured option 3 (Coonan, 2005). As the amount of funding allocated was not enough to cover the infrastructure costs of a stand-alone, nationwide channel (digital or analogue), a combination of distribution strategies was likely. The report had already outlined such a model, whereby satellite transmission would be the 'core platform, supplemented by arrangements with existing terrestrial broadcasters (such as the SBS and/or community television broadcasters) to retransmit a subset of the service's programs as part of their wider schedule'. This was considered the most cost-effective transmission option.

With limited time to begin delivery of the service, the NITV committee (which took over from the ITV working party when the service was given the go ahead) began negotiations to secure distribution channels. ICTV members had spoken passionately about retaining their service on Imparja's Channel 31 in numerous meetings and papers. However, as Imparja was a commercial licensee controlling the satellite capacity, the Imparja board had the right to choose between keeping ICTV or replacing it with the new NITV service. It chose NITV. This meant NITV, rather than ICTV, would be available for retransmission in Aboriginal communities using the CBF-funded network of terrestrial transmitters. In November 2006, a few months after full-time NITV broadcasting commenced on Imparja's second channel, NITV established a channel on both the Foxtel and Austar cable- and satellite-delivered networks, making it available to subscription viewers as part of their basic package.

Although Imparja had the right to choose who had access to its satellite capacity, legislation passed in March 2007 effectively endorsed its decision. The provision of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* that exempts from most legal and regulatory obligations any services that are merely unaltered retransmissions of commercial, national or community broadcasts was extended to cover retransmissions of NITV programming, but not narrowcasting services generally (McGauran, 2007). This made it legally much less onerous for Imparja and communities to carry NITV rather than ICTV on the satellite and the local retransmitters.

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To complicate things further, the entire IBP was reviewed by the DCITA in 2006. Funding for video production to RIMOS was terminated, because the government said this was now likely to be provided principally through the NITV project (DCITA, 2006: 16). The NITV board, however, rejected this. No process was put in place to ensure money would be redirected to the RIMOs (aside from their program commissioning process) and, at the time of writing, it has still not occurred. The IBP money formerly dedicated to video was directed into radio. In a convergent media environment, this separation of radio and television funding within a sector whose practices were already multi-platform seems to be a backward step.

## Governance

### The community model

In a letter to the chair of AICA, Ken Reys, in August 2006, Communications Minister Helen Coonan outlined the government's position on the structure of the service:

in view of the fact that one of the pillars of [the *ITV Report's*] Option 3 is the programming developed by remote communities and currently provided on Imparja's narrowcast service ... the Government intends that the ITV service would continue to carry substantial programming intended for remote audiences and made in remote communities. At the same time, the Government wishes to support a single organisation providing Indigenous television services and the business plan should articulate the accommodation of the existing ICTV programming within NITV. A single organisation will allow for inclusion of remote and other community programming within the schedule and still allow for multiple carriage options with the ability to tailor content to suit specific carrier constraints. I would find it difficult to support a business plan that proposed an unnecessary duplication of management, content aggregation, editorial control or technical facilities.

Though choosing the partnership model, the government clearly preferred a single controlling organisation. This was a significant departure from previous policies that supported local or regional network models, such as the BRACS/RIBS model.

The Indigenous broadcasting sector was established out of a politics of self-determination. In his 2003 PhD thesis, Philip Batty (one of the founders of CAAMA) details how Aboriginal-run broadcasting organisations were designed to link the mechanisms of government and the collective Aboriginal 'self'. When Labor came to office in 1972 for the first time in 23 years, it proclaimed that it would not 'make decisions on behalf of Aborigines' (Gordon Bryant, quoted in Batty, 2003: 36). Indigenous people would be given the right to determine their own affairs. Self-determination meant the establishment of institutional frameworks intended to accomplish particular government ends. Aboriginal-run broadcasting organisations allowed for a degree of resistance and independence, yet were intended to facilitate the governance of a population.

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In media, especially anticipating the impact of AUSSAT in remote areas, self-determination was accompanied by a discourse of cultural vulnerability. BRACS enabled communities to ‘fight fire with fire’, as Kurt Granites from Walpiri Media described it — a means to preserve and build culture, heritage and language (WMA, 1983). The system gave communities a large amount of control over the retransmission of satellite content, as well as the means to produce and transmit locally produced content.

The language of self-determination was first used in relation to broadcasting by anthropologist Eric Michaels, who was actively involved in the development of Indigenous television in the mid-1980s. When Michaels first attempted to describe the possibilities for Indigenous TV, he made a distinction between two different models. The first was called ‘cultural maintenance’. It was based on local media production and transmission, with networking ‘designed from the community upward, and distribution networks [that] aim to serve remote users’ needs’ (Michaels, 1986: xvi). The model was intended to complement the central features of a lively tradition. The second model he named ‘pan-Aboriginalism’. Such a service would use point to multi-point distribution (mass media) to encompass all Aboriginal audiences. It would show high-quality programming ‘emphasised to disseminate effectively this new cultural form to a national audience’ (1986: xvi). By expressing preference for the local model, Michaels’ work was later criticised for ascribing a falsely ‘authentic’ Aboriginal identity to the traditional communities (see, for instance, Batty, 2003: 186; Hinkson, 2004: 152). It was nonetheless a prophetic analysis: the first model is an accurate description of ICTV; the second is what NITV aspires to become.

Michaels also warned that we should think carefully before choosing one over another:

Behind these lie philosophies of Aboriginal development as a whole. Where a person or agency promotes one or another technology, they are advancing also a social model, and we have a right to demand that the model be explicit and then ask whether it is acceptable. Mostly, people ignore these issues. They say one system is desirable because it’s cheaper, or easier to sell to government, or it’s just what the technology does. The fact is that there are many uses of technology, there are many technologies, and each has social consequences. (Michaels, 1986: xvii)

He summed up Yuendumu’s pirate (unlicensed) television station as a dramatic example of ‘the potential diversity of things we call TV’ (Michaels, 1990: 11).

NITV turns sharply away from the community-based, self-determination media model. When the Indigenous sector was established, Indigenous community councils were granted ‘limited licences’. Under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, many became community broadcasting licences. The community and Indigenous broadcasting spheres were combined within community broadcasting policy. Both were designed to give control to groups via community-based organisations, and to encourage non-professional media production reflecting local issues and views.

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Dissatisfaction with the community media categorisation appears intermittently throughout the history of Indigenous broadcasting. Non-Indigenous community radio began in the early 1970s, and non-Indigenous community television in 1993. The sector was based on the principles of media diversity, local content and multiculturalism. However, underlying assumptions about community media — such as its ‘alternative’ status and localism — also worked to keep it marginal within Australia’s media landscape. Community media organisations were considered too small to compete with the reach and influence of the mass media, while media participation was viewed as a trivial activity — the pursuit of a few amateur enthusiasts (see Rennie, 2006).

In his work for the Productivity Commission, Michael Meadows (2000) points out that Indigenous broadcasting is a first level of service, or ‘mainstream media’, for Indigenous peoples (2000: C4). This finding resulted in calls for a separate Indigenous broadcasting licence so that groups should not have to compete for licences with services that are merely an alternative. Meadows also argued that restrictions on the community licence, such as the requirement that stations be non-profit and provide access, prevent Indigenous stations pursuing commercial opportunities and may inhibit industry development (see also Hartley et al., 2000).

The community broadcasting sector found the Indigenous sector’s critique unhelpful at a time when the transition to digital television and radio was posing significant policy challenges. The CBAA did, however, accept the Indigenous sector’s calls for a separate licence during the digital television reviews. ICTV, in turn, accepted the community sector’s requirements for not-for-profit organisations and community participation. It thus represents a renewed endorsement of community-based structures for Indigenous Australian nations.

### **The public service broadcasting model**

The discourse of cultural vulnerability employed during the early Indigenous media campaigns (as outlined in Molnar and Meadows, 2001) was largely abandoned in the NITV business plan and charter. Instead, it argued for Indigenous industry and a robust cultural sector.

The NITV mission set by the board follows that of traditional public service broadcasters such as the ABC and the BBC: Television ‘that informs, entertains and educates Indigenous and other audiences about Australia’s Indigenous people and customs and issues of interest to Indigenous Australians’ (NITV Content Charter). The NITV committee emphasised that the new organisation would serve urban Indigenous populations and mainstream Australian audiences, not just remote communities. An essential component of the approach is high-quality content: ‘We are stockpiling the very best in existing shows and working with the cream of Black Australia’s film and program making industries to make new programs to share with you our country, our families, our love and our ways.’ (NITV Factsheet) Guidelines for program commissioning are similar to those for film funding bodies. The RIMOs now have to choose between making the type of expensive and small-volume content that NITV will commission, and

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the kind of local programming they were originally established to provide, but without funding. The new programming standards are likely to have a big impact on remote media industry development. There is a real possibility that industry development will work in favour of film school graduates, who are familiar with mainstream aesthetics, and become concentrated in urban centres as a result (Rijavec, 2007).

Quality programming has always been the domain of public service broadcasting (Jacka, 2001), while non-professional/amateur content belongs in the community sphere. The move away from the community governance version of self-determination transfers emphasis from transmission and bottom-up production to commissioned content and reward for producers. The traditional public service broadcasting role of knowing what's best for audiences and the nation is a core component of what NITV has set out to achieve. This is reflected in a prescriptive programming model, which fits programs to specified durations, genres and production values.

If the community model was, as Batty's Foucauldian description attests, a system by which the government could accommodate the hard-to-manage zone of Indigenous heritage and culture, NITV has positioned itself as an authority that can at least partially eliminate the complexity of that 'contract'. NITV, in other words, is an institution that deliberately resists engagement with what Young (1990) called 'the problem of community'.

## **Political tension**

Introducing a public service broadcasting model over an existing, and by most accounts innovative, grassroots sector caused significant tension within the Indigenous media sector. The dismantling of the 'Indigenous sector' (a term used by Rowse, 2002) under the Howard government's Northern Territory intervention — which effectively put an end to the strategy of self-determination — exacerbated the issue.

In 2004, the federal government began 'mainstreaming' Indigenous services, particularly in remote Indigenous communities. Following the abolition of ATSIC, Indigenous funding programs were distributed back to the various mainstream government departments. This continued with changes to the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program towards mainstream Jobsearch programs, reduced funding and services for smaller communities and homelands, a move from recurrent funding programs to Regional Partnership Agreements and Shared Responsibility Agreements, as well as changes to Aboriginal corporations towards a company board of directors model. The intervention by the federal government into Northern Territory communities in 2007 removed the permit system and instituted five-year leases over communities, undermining land rights in the process. Remote community members felt the goalposts were constantly shifting. Top-down programs were being instituted, or being outsourced for delivery by commercial providers, taking away local ownership and control.

The Northern Territory intervention had direct and indirect consequences for the Indigenous media sector. As Jim Remedio, chair of AICA, has pointed out, the

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intervention took power away from community councils, who hold the community broadcasting licences (Remedio, 2007). The government acquired the power to appoint managers to run local councils. These managers could direct operations and determine how money would be spent. Under community broadcasting licence conditions, the licensee must provide access to the community it is intended to serve and allow that community control over the operations of the station. By dismantling the autonomy of the councils, the intervention jeopardised Indigenous community licensees' five-yearly licence renewals. The removal of the CDEP employment scheme had an even more immediate impact: the organisation where Remedio works, CAAMA, lost five workers as a result of its abolition. Many other remote and urban organisations experienced similar losses.

The indirect consequence of the intervention was a public and heated debate on the best use of Imparja's second channel and the proposed single-service model of NITV (see Rijavec, 2007). Due to its top-down company structure, NITV was perceived as elitist and bullish. Noel Pearson, in a satirical article in *The Australian*, implied that NITV was symptomatic of the Howard government's deliberate strategy to end self-determination:

This right-wing, jackbooted, cowboy-hatted Howard Government had stumped up \$48.5 million for the new network, which was set up over the still warm body of ICTV. If he were not the author of this article, I would swear that right-wing fascist Lutheran mission mongrel Noel Pearson was in on this bastardry. (Pearson, 2007a)

Pearson retracted the article the following week 'because everyone took my (yes, mischievous) piece literally' (Pearson, 2007b).

The controversy over NITV demonstrates the resilience of community-based structures and their tendency to resist authority and elitism. The Northern Territory intervention created a climate where many were sceptical of top-down control. NITV found itself caught in the crossfire.

### **Consequences for research**

Indigenous media have interested community media scholars precisely because they have worked against the traditional hierarchy of media sectors. In many countries, public service broadcasting has the highest cultural status, followed by commercial and community media. For Australian Indigenous people, the community model was the dominant one — despite its problems — due to the influence of self-determination as a discourse and strategy. Many continue to argue that its local specificity better represents the diversity of Indigenous people's cultural and social experience. Both commercial enterprise (Imparja) and public service broadcasting programming (ABC's *Message Stick*, SBS's *Living Black*) were developed as either subsidiaries of the community organisation (Imparja as an initiative of CAAMA) or as a 'restricted' or inauthentic version of Indigenous media (ABC and SBS-produced content). As a result, the Indigenous community media sector has been perceived as a comparatively strong and successful community-based media model.

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Anthropologists, too, have reinforced the need for a flexible, community-governed model in remote areas, by focusing on how the media has been adapted according to specific social qualities. Most researchers have set out to describe a novel media model and have reinforced the established policy position (cf. Hartley and McKee, 2000). NITV therefore presents a significant challenge for Indigenous media research. In departing from the policy approaches that have characterised Indigenous media since the 1980s, NITV requires us to rethink the theoretical frameworks and analysis that have accompanied it. The questions outlined below are intended as a starting point to expand the agenda of Indigenous media research and to consider the role of community-based media in larger media systems.

## Looking forward

The achievement of a public service broadcaster takes Indigenous media out of the margins. However, the hierarchy of media is changing once more. In November 2007, *ABC News* filed a report on 'Zorba The Greek Yolngu style', a dance devised by the Chooky Dancers of Arnhem Land, using traditional moves to a *Zorba the Greek* soundtrack. The video of the dance was originally screened on YouTube, where it has attracted over 870 000 views. The 'diversity of things we call TV' now stretches from Yuendumu to YouTube with everything mainstream in between.

User-generated content, social networking media and amateur production are challenging the status and business models of both the commercial and public broadcasting sectors. According to new media theorists such as Yochai Benkler (2006), non-market production is transforming society and the economy in profound ways. These changes are causing public service broadcasters to revise their strategies. In some respects, the 'old' public service broadcasters are moving towards the kinds of advanced community media generation that Australian Indigenous media has concentrated on for two decades. Initiatives such as the BBC's Digital Storytelling and the Action Network on [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) represent a turn towards community participation in public service media.

For Indigenous sovereignty and nationhood, the move away from the 'marginal' community sector makes symbolic sense. The historical trajectory from 'community' to 'public', however, may be precluding more innovative models. For instance, we need to ask whether, in the twenty-first century, we should invest public broadcasting responsibility into a sole institution. These debates are well progressed in the United Kingdom. The BBC's dominance is being attacked by industry lobbyists, who see it as anti-competitive, and the government is building a new community radio sector as a low-cost means to accommodate diversity. New Zealand's Maori TV service now has a second channel, established to reflect a broader range of Maori culture and provide more Maori language programming (Drinnan, 2007). Both channels are available on the digital terrestrial Freeview service, launched in April 2008.

While ICTV's IBP funding is not assured for 2008–09, its membership hopes the service will continue in some form. Negotiations with NITV did not result

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in ‘untied’ funding for video production and training, such as the RIMOs had formerly received through the IBP. However, NITV has commissioned a 13-week series of a one-hour weekly program entitled *Jukurrpa: From the Desert to the Sea*, to be funded by NITV and produced and compiled by the RIMOs. This is seen as a way of sustaining ICTV while it develops new ways to effectively deliver on its mandate to provide local content to remote communities. ICTV will continue to seek funding for remote video production and distribution on top of the NITV *Jukurrpa* program.

The ICTV board hopes the ICTV service will eventually develop into a series of regional content networks, similar to the radio networks. For instance, the PAW radio network spans 11 remote indigenous communities, 480 000 square kilometres and five language groups. As with radio, the boundaries of the regional ICTV services will be determined by language and cultural ties between groups.

It is hard to say whether ICTV’s predicament is the result of a political climate where Indigenous self-determination was looked upon suspiciously or whether it had more to do with the marginal status of community media generally. The ICTV–NITV issue suggests that non-profit media organisations, and bottom-up media generally, are poorly understood. Looking forward, new questions emerge: Can community media structures produce content capable of addressing national concerns and does it matter? Can a national service truly reflect the diversity of Indigenous Australia? Is consensus possible for this media sector and its audiences, and how does it occur given the complex cultural structure of Indigenous Australia? Moreover, the real issues faced by Indigenous people — displacement, disengagement, health and well-being — will still need to be addressed by and through the media, alongside ownership, participation and self-worth. The answers to these questions will only unfold as the new Indigenous media landscape develops. If it survives, the ICTV service will be an important component of a mature, multi-tiered media system.

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**Ellie Rennie** is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology. Her research for this article was conducted through an ARC Discovery Project: DJ74476.

**Daniel Featherstone** has been the Media Coordinator of Ngaanyatjarra Media since 2001. He has worked alongside Indigenous media workers in the development of ICTV and the remote media sector. Daniel is currently writing his MA thesis at Murdoch University.