

Philip Batty – Interview with Tony Dowmunt

“The most powerful tool ever handed to Aboriginal people?”

[00:00:09] Teaching Art in Papunya

...I guess my interest in the development of an Aboriginal media started when I went to the Aboriginal community of Papunya in 1977. And I was already fairly politicised - I'd completed a course in Fine Arts in Sydney ...in painting, sculpture, Television Production, Photography, performance and all that sort of thing, anyway. I went to Papunya as an art teacher - and for most white people in Australia (including myself) I'd never really had anything to do with Aboriginal people - up until then; and it was a real culture shock. I went to this community, very remote, west of Alice Springs. There are over a thousand Aboriginal people there and about 30 whites. And suddenly I was plunged into a white ghetto in the middle of Australia. And the sort of political sort of outlook I had at that time was very much expanded - just looking around a place like Papunya to that point, where people were still living under - and still are really - living under sheets of corrugated iron. Health was very poor, alcoholism was rampant, domestic violence rampant. Things were in pretty bad state. And so that really kind of politicised me in a big way. And I already, already always had an interest in media from my art school days and I'd read all ... quite a lot of books... you know all the standard theoretical work on media representation and media power and media monopolies and stuff like that - and so I kind of start to apply that actually at Papunya, and one of the things I started doing was to get involved in the production of a local magazine or newspaper.

And the other thing I did was to go around recording interviews with Aboriginal people in Papunya, on a cassette tape, and then getting multiple copies made in Alice Springs and handing it around to people in Papunya.

By that point I'd become fairly disillusioned with the whole art world - being fairly, being a heavily politicised young chap, I just felt the whole art world was in the embrace of you know, high capitalists, and the whole thing was run by wealthy collectors, and shonky art galleries etc - and I still sort of think that a bit. So I didn't, I didn't really want to do with art, and I'd started teaching just basic literature to adults, and learning the local language and learning as much as I could about Aboriginal people.

[00:03:06] The coming of AUSSAT (Australia's national satellite company)

One of the other things that really got me going on this road too was that the last year I was at Papunya - I was there for three years - there was a delegation that arrived from Canberra (capital of Australia) - and I mean there was always delegations arriving from somewhere at Papunya. So you know a Minister from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs or Health and Housing or whatever, would turn up at regular, you know, every month or so. That was something else that actually struck me, that these people turn up, they speak in absolute point-blank English, and people sit around not understanding any of it at all, and then they stride off and that was the end of it. So there was another area I really felt that needed addressing, you know, just that basic level of having information provided in local languages about what was going to happen to these people, you know. But this delegation turned up from the federal Department of Communications about the satellite - it was then called AUSSAT, the domestic satellite service - and they're out there basically to find out what people wanted with the satellite. And that just seemed to me like someone turning up at my home in Sydney and saying, you know, we are setting up a colony on the moon: what would you like to put in your, in the colony there, you know, what furniture would you want? It was just completely bewildering for people out at Papunya, I mean it made no sense, I mean it barely made any sense to me because they spoke in this very technical jargon and what

could be right. And that also really had a big effect on me, you know: God, they're gonna be provided with this...latest communications technology in this remote community, and in fact it's going to affect hundreds of remote Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, and the people in these places had not a clue what it meant, what it could provide. [00:07:13] They didn't have any forum on which they could provide their views, even if they knew what to talk about. So that was something else that really had an effect on me.

...and people forget this: there was absolutely nothing available anywhere. Certainly in the Northern Territory, there was no radio programmes, no television, no media services of any description whatsoever for Aboriginal people - even though they represented in Central Australia about 50 per cent of the population and about a third of the overall Territory population. And there was ... about 30 different languages spoken in the Territory.

[00:05:48] **Founding CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association)**

I started working with John Macumba, an Aboriginal guy who actually wasn't from Alice Springs - he grew up in Adelaide - but we both sort of had an interest in this area. So after a long story, we started producing this half hour radio program called the *Aboriginal Half Hour*. It was on the commercial station at NHA, and it went to air about nine o'clock Sunday nights. You know the absolute highest rating time in television and the lowest rating for radio; and the only reason the commercial station gave it to us was because in those days - unlike today - there was regular check-ups on commercial stations' licence performance, and they knew that they had to provide something for what was a large Aboriginal audience. And they were due to be examined by the, what was then the Australian...Australian Broadcasting Tribunal which is now defunct. Now it's just a free for all: you've got the money, you do what you like. So that was the reason why we actually got that time. And that's where it kicked off. We were producing that radio program for a few months and then we worked at setting up an organisation. Took a long time. We had several community meetings where not many people turned up. You know it was always...part of the problem was always trying to explain to people what a media service was, you know, how you could actually get involved in media - because as I said at that point there was no Aboriginal involvement in media at all, or in television or radio or anything - not even a newspaper. So just the very fact of trying to convince people they could actually access, and get involved in the media was something you had to explain to people. So it took us a while to set the organisation up and initially was gonna be called the "black media group" or the "black revolutionary communications organization" or *[laughs]* something like that - but it ended up being the very staid "Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association" - which was sort of like the names of other organizations in Alice Springs, you know the Central Australian Legal Aid Service, Central Australian blah blah blah. So it became CAAMA. You know that acronym wasn't thought of before ... So it became CAAMA and it was incredible. It was in the heyday of large government grants to Aboriginal organizations. There were still a lot of optimism in Australia then generally for plans to improve Aboriginal living conditions, and all the rest of it. So the Land Rights legislation had only gone through a few years before, the Central Land Council was then heavily engaged in winning back land for people. So there was a high level of optimism and we were...you know in a sense money was thrown at us by government, and CAAMA grew exponentially and we set up the radio station in about 1984, and about three years after we set the organization up, we set up a video production and television production unit, in '84 or '85, a music production company - we started recording lots of Aboriginal musicians, set up two commercial retail outlets. And, by about '85 I think we submitted an application to get access to the satellite service, not to run a whole station.

[00:09:35] **Deciding to go for the AUSSAT License**

What happened in the end - and this happened under a Labor government - is that the minister decided not to provide access to a whole range of community groups including the Aboriginal groups. It decided just to give the license to the best commercial operator in/through a bidding process - and that's where all the trouble began, I think for CAAMA, because we didn't want to run a whole television station. We just wanted access, but we were forced by the Government's change in direction to go for a complete licence - which meant running a commercial television service which is not what was the original intention at all. We're a community-based service specifically to develop programming – television, radio etc. - for Aboriginal people not to run a commercial service.

My personally and others thought well what's the point in applying for a commercial service? We don't want to run a commercial service, sure, if we win it we'll have a carte blanche, we'll be able to do what we like...we'll sell it on, the commercial part of it - while other groups were saying no we should go for it and see what turns out. So... And it's sort of a momentum built, you know. So in the end I and others agreed, we'll go for the full license and... And it's funny in this sort of, in that whole lobbying area. If you go to government for support with a big idea and a big project, they really kind of latch onto it. I'm sure, because if a bureaucrat, a senior bureaucrat supports a particular project that's going to end in a big result, it's good for their careers and it's good for politicians. So, in fact a lot of politicians got involved. So, when we applied for money to go for a satellite television service that was going to cover the whole Northern Territory and South Australia, it was going to be run by Aboriginal people, it was going to inspire a lot of interest in the bureaucracy and politicians - on the left, of course. It absolutely horrified politicians on the right. I mean they were caught off guard, really - they couldn't they didn't even imagine that a community based Aboriginal organization was going to go for this commercial satellite service.

[00:11:55] **CAAMA/Imparja and the Tribunal Hearings**

Well, what happened in the end is that...we went before the Broadcasting, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal hearing, and even though there were about six applicants initially it boiled down to just two: CAAMA's application which by them was called...We'd set up a paper company called Imparja, but it was launched by CAAMA...So there was two: CAAMA and Channel 8 in Darwin - which was a privately owned commercial TV station in Darwin.

The essential issue was that we had not enough money, no expertise in the area of satellite television or any television broadcasting, but we had lots of “cultural capital” you might say - to borrow Bourdieu’s phrase - and lots of political support - I think including from the tribunal itself, which was basically run by a bunch of lefties that had gone into the tribunal you know, academics. But on the other side Channel 8 had all the money, they'd run a television service for years. They are an established broadcasting service in the Northern Territory - but they didn't have the cultural capital. They had no plans to provide services to Aboriginal groups, or any particular groups in the territory. They didn't have the support of any community groups. So, it boiled down to this. The tribunal said “we're not going to give a licence to anyone, any of the applicants ... Imparja, go away and find some money and some technical expertise. Channel 8, you go away and find some community support for your service - particularly Aboriginal support. So, the second tribunal was reconvened about six months later. We had six months to raise six million dollars, and we did – incredibly.

So the second hearing went ahead and ...we presented our evidence, they presented theirs, and in the middle of the tribunal hearing, it came down on absolute stalemate - because what I'd forgot to mention before is that the largest, the bulk of the money we were going to get was coming from what was then the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the Minister had not decided – he'd dilly-dallied around, had not decided whether to give us the money or not. And in the middle of the tribunal hearing, the hearing was stopped to clarify with the Minister whether the money is going to come through or not. And I remember standing at the tribunal hearing in Alice Springs next to the DAA, Department of Aboriginal Affairs bureaucrat - not on the mobile but on the phone to the Minister - the Minister said “Yeah, give them the money” – bang! So we went back into the hearing, and in the end the tribunal said on balance we'll give the licence to CAAMA

and Imparja. But reading their decision [was] very interesting - they said while both sides qualified, the 'on balance' bit was because CAAMA was promising to provide a broader range of Aboriginal programming as well, and many more hours than the other side was going to do - and we had the expertise in the area. So, essentially we won the licence on balance on our promise to provide Aboriginal broadcasting - that's in Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal content etc.

[00:15:43] **The development of Imparja Television**

So anyway...we went ahead with it. There's a lot of, you know rapid sort of movements and rapid kind of hiring of staff and setting up of studios, and installation of satellite uplink services, and a whole huge amount of work.

Because at this point Imparja just sort of became - where it was just a small child, originally on paper with CAAMA, it has now become a large organization, by far over-shadowing CAAMA, with financial assets and technical assets and staffing and all the rest of it.

...so the service went up in Imparja television, and for the first year I think we managed pretty well to live up to the promise to the tribunal and we were producing I don't know what ... three or four or five hours of television a week of Aboriginal material, and in languages and news and information etc.. And also... been buying in commercial television from a whole bunch of commercial operators in Australia. So, the service looked pretty interesting - it was a sort of a mix of very local Aboriginal material with, you know, *Dallas* and all that sort of junk and commercial news services and things. I thought it was quite interesting in a postmodern sort of way.

Imparja had to make money from the production of local advertising, and the purchase of national advertising, on the one hand. On the other hand its facilities had to be used to make television programmes for Aboriginal people. Now, advertisers would buy lots of time on *Dallas* and the commercial news service and commercial programmes, but they'd buy almost no or none, no time at all on the the Aboriginal programmes. *Dallas* and all the other commercial television services and the national news could be bought literally for about 30 40 dollars an hour, you know. Cheap as chips. It was based on the size of the audience, while making the Pitjantjatjara half hour or the Warlpiri half hour or a program on Aboriginal bush tucker, would cost then, you know five, ten grand a half hour - which was cheap - but as largely you know, large stuff ...and no advertising to be sold. So there was an argument about commercial viability, and also the use of equipment - and increasingly, as Imparja wanted to make more money from commercial advertising, the equipment was more and more used by local commercial advertisers - and they got priority - and it came down on an extraordinary level where you'd have someone who ran the local hardware, you know, electronic hardware shop coming in using the studios and having someone produce for them in the day. And then the CAAMA production team doing Aboriginal television, having to use it like literally at 12 o'clock at night sometimes 2:00 in the morning.

[00:18:56] **Conflict with Imparja Manager (Dion Weston) & the CAAMA Board**

And it just came to a head and we said "Look what have we done? This was won on the basis on the promise of running Aboriginal services. Not only is the production equipment being used for commercial production, we're getting, we're getting squeezed for time more and more", because the advertisers of course wanted the best time slots, so Imparja had to buy commercially attractive programmes, usually from America or something, you know, via established networks in Australia. So it really came to a crunch and...we - myself and Freda Glynn (the Aboriginal woman I worked with) and others at CAAMA - we basically said "Look. We're going to take Imparja back", so to speak, and so listen, [we said to] Dion who was the manager then "...You got to take direction from us, not just in a broad policy area but you have to take direction from us right down to the point of the allocation of hours, the allocation of equipment usage, and the priority has got to be Aboriginal programming. And we don't think this argument about running a commercial TV

service to keep it afloat is court order". Because ... two thirds of the station was still subsidized by government – and it still is. Um. Dion refused to take any notice of us and Freda issued him with a dismissal notice. He took that to the all Aboriginal board. He won. We lost....And Freda and I resigned, not long after that. And Imparja, from then on to now it's just been a big red Commercial TV service that wasn't and hasn't really fulfilled any of the expectations and promises, and all the things we wanted to achieve that originally was uh presented to the Tribunal.

[00:21:08] **The outlook of the Board**

...the people on the Imparja board were essentially from urban Alice Springs - not entirely but they dominated the board. And they had a very, very different outlook to people like me and Freda and others, even though Freda was from that area - I mean it's not black and white you know.... But [they anyway, look the Aboriginal people on that board had a very different outlook. They just saw it as a straight commercial enterprise. They didn't really buy into the whole idea of Aboriginal television, I don't think - partly because I don't think I could imagine what it would be like. And partly because - this might sound strange but - they just wanted to be uh managers of a straight run of the mill television service.

But for me personally, so yeah the Aboriginal people on that board quite happily acquiesced to the demands that - there was pressure coming from the funding bodies too, sure - but acquiesced to the demands of commercial necessity, you know.

But for me in this particular instance it was real naivete – even though I was aware of it - of the social differentiation within the Aboriginal community itself...

... where we get small elites who will dominate the agenda and the mass of the illiterate, ill-educated people of their own group won't have a clue what's going on. And in some sense, I got to the point now where I think that's almost that's almost inevitable, it's almost inevitable. I mean you know um, any society would throw out these elites and it's incredibly hard to um, I don't know, deal with this... this almost inevitable way in which elites will control the agenda, gain power. And that's what happened there, I mean. And what's really a terrible, terrible crying shame I think is that, again outside the Aboriginal media stuff, the general position of Aboriginal people in Central Australia - for the worst off of that community, most underprivileged section of the community, which is the majority in Central Australia - are no better off than they were when we started this 30 years ago. They're worse off. I mean helath, in the level of domestic violence, in levels of incarceration, poor educational levels, it's just as bad. But I think that small elite, that relatively small elite, I think things have improved for them.

[00:23:59] **'Saint Eric' Michaels on Imparja and Aboriginal culture**

Well looking back on what Eric was writing back in the 80s, yeah I think in many ways he was right, in many ways he was wrong. I think he was right about ... about his take on Imparja. He was very critical at the time of Imparja.....On one level he's turned out to be right. From recollection - I haven't read his stuff for a while - but he was saying at the time that the focus in terms of funding should be on remote communities and small community groups and not on a big organization like Imparja. It will lead to a disaster, and he's absolutely right. And that did happen. So we should have listened to saint Eric on that score. But where is wrong: he had a real essentialist idea of Aboriginal culture. You know he - even though he denied absolutely you know - he saw Aboriginal culture as this sort of carved in stone, traditional thing - and that that's how you should run things, and that's what the focus should be on Aboriginal men, you know people catching kangaroos and things like that. And so, I think you had that essentialist view of Aboriginal culture that's where he was...he went off the track a bit. So, he was right and wrong in some ways ...But also remembering Eric he was very...kind of a fraught sort of person. He was very cranky and angry most of the time, and I think a lot of that criticism of Imparja was about the fact that he wasn't in

on the whole project - that was part of it. [Laughs] And the fact that it was sort of ... that he never really got much funding for his project out at Yuendumu.

[00:25:53] **Looking back to *Satellite Dreaming***

... yeah, as I said I think - and I still believe - handing a satellite television service to an Aboriginal group... represented really the most powerful tool that's ever really been handed to Aboriginal people in Australia. I really think that, I still think that. But, of course it wasn't used to ... any degree that we assumed it was gonna be used. I mean it could have provided - as we originally intended - a fantastic educational service. Information on legal rights and a whole lot of things you know but it wasn't used at all.

But I think it goes back to what I was saying before about the, the general promise of media and what it can do. I'm far less, just to myself, far less...of the view that changing media will change much in the broader situation of people. I don't think just giving people the means of production of their own representation, et cetera, et cetera, can change much. So, I have a lot more moderate view of what media can actually do - even when it's in the hands of smaller local communities. It's far, far too complex, to simply have that very simple view, even though it's good what's happening in communities. And also you just can't sort of focus on media itself. You got to look at the whole body... the whole social body of the people that you're working with....