

11. New media projects at Yuendumu: Towards a history and analysis of intercultural engagement

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In the early 1980s, before television was accessible to most of remote Australia, residents of some Aboriginal communities in these parts of the country were experimenting with video production. One township where such activity was occurring was Yuendumu, 300 km north-west of Alice Springs, home to a fluctuating population of 900 predominantly Warlpiri-speaking Aboriginal and 100 non-Aboriginal people. At Yuendumu local video production preceded the establishment of a 'pirate' television station in April 1985. A new organisation, the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA), was incorporated the same year. Established as the Federal government was preparing to launch AUSSAT,¹ WMA became a rallying point for the concerns and interests of persons from Yuendumu and surrounding areas regarding the launch of the satellite and arrival of national television in the region. This activity laid the groundwork for a range of subsequent developments in the township, most notably the establishment of the Tanami Network, the first Aboriginal-owned video conferencing network in Australia and the first publicly accessible facility in the Northern Territory (NT).

Aspects of the first phase of this history are relatively well known, largely through the writings of the late Eric Michaels (1986, 1989, 1994). Michaels, an Institute Research Fellow [AIATSIS] appointed in 1982 to assess 'the impact' of bringing television to remote Aboriginal Australia, located his enquiry at Yuendumu where he became integrally involved in projects leading to the establishment of the WMA. Michaels' published works depict a culturally distinctive Warlpiri approach to video production and viewing. His descriptions of Warlpiri cultural resilience in the face of massive social change had wide appeal, particularly for academics and students with an interdisciplinary interest in

Resonance of tradition

contemporary Indigenous cultural expression, as well as policy makers and arts practitioners. Michaels completed his fellowship in 1986 and met an untimely death in 1988. In subsequent years, in the wake of the launch of AUSSAT and the increasing connectedness of 'remote' Aboriginal Australia into regional, national and international arenas through a suite of new communication technologies, a new industry of writing about the implications of that process was born.²

Indeed, Michaels contributed to the establishment of a whole way of speaking about Indigenous media practice in Australia that continues to have considerable currency today. At the core of this way of speaking sit the concepts of political resistance and cultural maintenance. When I went to Yuendumu in the mid-1990s to undertake extended research in this area, I found the WMA of Michaels' accounts difficult to recognise. And over the next two years that I lived in the township it became clearer to me that, while no doubt much had changed, there were certain aspects of Michaels' analysis that remained fundamentally problematic.

In this chapter I want to do three things. First, revisit the central findings of Eric Michaels' research regarding Warlpiri use of video and television. Second, briefly explore developments that have occurred at Yuendumu in the years since Michaels was working there. Finally, offer an alternative way of thinking about ongoing motivation to use new visual media and communications technologies at Yuendumu. I argue that these new technologies play a central part in sustaining an expanding arena of social interaction which is unprecedented and carries with it a new range of choices and challenges for Warlpiri to negotiate regarding how they might live.

The Michaels model of Aboriginal media

The title of Michaels' final report to the Institute, *The Aboriginal Invention of Television*, gives a clear indication of the overall framework of his findings. In short, having taken video recording and editing equipment to Yuendumu in 1983, and having trained several Warlpiri in its use, Michaels observed those individuals' utilisation of these new media to take a culturally distinctive form. In the production and viewing of videos, for example, Michaels identified culturally distinctive practices observable more widely in Warlpiri social relations. That is to say he observed video production and viewing to be circumscribed by kin-based social organisation, with its attendant prescriptions and

prohibitions. Michaels drew attention to the challenges that audiovisual recording practices pose for those who regulate the flow of knowledge within and between kin groups, as well as across generation and gender, as a fundamental framework of social life. The revelation of ritual knowledge, for example, was once thoroughly circumscribed in contexts in time and space, with careful regulation of who could and could not see and/or hear that which was being revealed. Michaels (1985) showed the ways in which recording these events in audiovisual format dissolves such constraints, enabling knowledge to be lifted out of the grounded social contexts in which it was originally articulated, performed and exchanged.

Across his published works Michaels positioned himself at the centre of an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, mass media and Aboriginal systems of knowledge were viewed as ‘cultural systems diametrically opposed in their logics’ (Michaels 1989:13). Yet at the same time Michaels (1989:25) argued that Warlpiri may subvert the inherent logic of the mass media through an invention of their own culturally distinctive media practice. He posited the question of control as central in resolving this contradiction. Around this issue of control Michaels articulated two alternative possible futures Warlpiri had to choose between; ‘a cultural future’ which he translated as cultural maintenance, or a ‘lifestyle future’ and cultural demise. ‘A cultural future’, Michaels (1989:78) argued, ‘can only result from political resistance’. In Michaels’ terms, a cultural future will only be realised if the Warlpiri can ‘embed [video] production in traditional forms’ (Michaels and Kelly 1984:34). Yet there is a false dichotomy implicit here — between traditional and modern, culture and lifestyle — that assumes cultural reproduction to be a static process. In Michaels’ accounts, culture is itself reified as a set of aesthetic practices or ‘systems’ to be preserved, rather than as a series of lived realities and social relations evolving through time. There is a further unintended consequence of his analysis: in adopting this discourse of media as ‘cultural maintenance’, Michaels allowed the Warlpiri only one way of engaging with new media, and by extension with other new social forms, that is conceived as truly authentic. In so doing, he falls prey to what Robert Hodge (1990:202) has dubbed the ‘spirit of Aboriginalism’. In a ‘cultural future’ Warlpiri will succeed in doing what no other people has done before them: they will subvert the very logic of the mass media. Yet if they fail, they will be subsumed within the homogenising tendencies of those same media, lose their cultural

Resonance of tradition

distinctiveness, and be reduced to membership of a pan-Aboriginal mass.

Static oppositions such as these are marked throughout Michaels' work and, as I discuss below, they do not sit well within a long and complex history of *intercultural* engagement at Yuendumu that well and truly pre-dates the arrival of television. Yet perhaps the most compelling counter-argument to Michaels' binary possible futures is reflected simply in the subsequent use of communications technologies at Yuendumu after his departure.

Tracing two decades of developments in electronic communications at Yuendumu

In his 1986 report to the Institute, Michaels (1986) reported that the modes of communication available to Yuendumu residents for contact with the outside world were a highly unreliable radio-telephone, a telegram service, Royal Flying Doctor Service emergency radio, police radio, a CB radio network (operating in European houses) and a twice-weekly mail service.

Less than a decade later, this situation had shifted considerably. By 1995 Yuendumu had a functioning telephone and facsimile system, two TV channels — ABC and Imparja — transmitting simultaneously, ABC and CAAMA radio, email and internet access, and a video-conferencing network.

By mid-2001 this situation had expanded further: there were now four television channels being transmitted simultaneously, and the accessibility of telephones had markedly increased with phones recently installed in fourteen new Warlpiri houses. Electronic Funds Transfer (EFTPOS) facilities were also available in the Social Club store.

These observations deserve considerable unpacking, but I list them here merely to give a sense of the extent to which 'remote' townships such as Yuendumu have been swept up in the telecommunications revolution that has traversed the globe in recent decades. Fifteen years ago, Michaels saw the introduction of commercial television looming as an unprecedented challenge to remote living Aborigines. With the benefit of hindsight, the arrival of television comes to be seen as just one manifestation of a much broader process: globalisation, in a new accelerated form, carried by high-tech communications to all corners of the world.

New communications technologies have greatly expanded Warlpiri engagement with images, objects, persons and places originating from

outside their township. Conversely, they have made Yuendumu ever more accessible to a whole array of institutions with diverse interests in that place. But how has this high-tech revolution made itself manifest on the ground at Yuendumu? There are several fronts on which these questions might be addressed [see Hinkson (2002) for a fuller discussion of these issues]. For the purposes of this short chapter I shall confine my comments to a brief discussion of what has arguably been the most significant development to emerge from the activities of the 1980s at Yuendumu — the establishment of the Tanami Network.

Tanami Network

Tanami Network was launched in 1991 after representatives of the townships of Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Willowra and Kintore voted to contribute significant moneys from local mining royalties to its establishment.³ At the time that Aborigines of the region voted in favour of launching their own video-conferencing network, they also identified particular programs that they were keen for the facility to provide. Paramount among these were a secondary education program that, for the first time, would allow children to participate in secondary classes without leaving their community, a prison-links program linking the member communities with Alice Springs and Darwin prisons, and links on demand between the four communities themselves. The network was established with six sites, one in each of the member communities, Alice Springs and Darwin.

One criticism commonly levelled at those associated with Tanami Network's establishment is that the amount of money involved — \$1.6m infrastructure and substantial recurrent costs — could have been allocated to other, more basic priorities. Why would those who are supposedly so 'disadvantaged' according to what we might refer to as 'mainstream social indicators' want a video-conferencing network? In conjuring up the diverse social arenas across which contemporary Warlpiri life is lived, an answer to this question begins to emerge. As it does we can also, I think, reach a better understanding of the limitations of Michaels' analysis.

The range of uses to which the facility was put over the first four years of operation provides some context for considering such issues. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the uses to which Tanami Network has been put in the first four full years of operation, Table 1 provides something of an overview. In brief, the

Resonance of tradition

Table 1. Tanami Network video-conferences (by hour)

Use / Client	1993	1994	1995	1996
Family/community meetings	70	51	17	14
Secondary education	120	515	240	98
Adult education	21	19	5	2
Teacher inservicing	20	43	-	-
Prison links	11	62	33	12
Community recruitment	6	11	12	18
Legal hearings(commercial)	11	17	32	42
Miscellaneous commercial users	16	35	35	47
Central Land Council	2	3	7	4
Telemedicine trials	14	24	34	42
Representations to public forums	20	18	13	17
NT Government agencies	28	7	15	2
Art marketing	2	2	-	1
International cultural exchanges	1	2	2	1
Demonstrations	6	44	2	-
Internal training and meetings	20	11	5	9
Test links	16	23	5	11
Cancelled links	16	80	71	78
Recorded failed links	6	9	4	17
	406	976	89	115
Total hours	368	864	452	309

Source: Tanami Network bookings diaries, 1993–1996.

Note: Totals do not include tests, failed or cancelled conferences. All links include Yuendumu.

diversity of uses documented here can be interpreted as directly reflecting recent history as well as some key dimensions of contemporary life at Yuendumu. Secondary education, adult education and teacher in-servicing reflect the central place of the school and education as an institution within the township — as an education provider in the tradition of bilingual education the school is a major focus for the town's children, but also for the growing number of Warlpiri men and women who are qualified teachers and teaching aides. Contrary to Michaels' (1989:74, 1990:25) claim that Warlpiri resisted attempts by missionaries and government agents to teach them

print literacy, reading and writing are central dimensions of many aspects of contemporary life, not least of all the processes of community governance. The desire for a prison-links program reflects the high levels of incarceration of Aboriginal men in the region. Links with the Central Land Council, as well as with some arms of government, reflect the central place of the *Land Rights Act* as an institutional framework through which a range of activities undertaken on Warlpiri lands are negotiated and administered. Trials of tele-medicine equipment occur in an attempt to tackle the poor health status of Warlpiri and the under-resourcing of their clinic. The bureaucratic implications of self-determination policies for remote living Aboriginal persons are reflected in links to diverse government departments and agencies. And finally, successful involvement in the Aboriginal art market and the global arena of Indigenous rights are also indicated.

Each of these uses of the video-conferencing facility is not only an outward-looking interaction, reflecting enthusiastic interests of some Warlpiri men and women to engage with and learn about the wider world, but also a wider political reality articulated by many Warlpiri about the need to do things ‘both ways’ in a post-settlement context. It would be highly misleading to interpret the activity of Tanami Network in terms of ‘cultural maintenance’. Certainly there are categories of links that may be seen as simply extending the contexts in which relations between kin are fostered and reproduced; the categories of family/community meetings and prison links in particular. But as the data in Table 1 reflect, these are by no means the dominant uses.⁴ When Warlpiri participate in video conferencing — whether it be in school classes, in exchanges with other Indigenous persons, in meetings with government departments or service providers, or the exhibition and sale of Warlpiri art — they may be engaging in many things, but cultural maintenance would appear to be low order among them. It seems that there is a different dynamic at work here. This is a tendency in Warlpiri society to reach outwards, to engage with persons, objects, images across the intercultural divide, at the same time as seeking new ways to communicate with the kin who now travel through this expanding social arena. This is a dynamic that can be seen to have been at work in Warlpiri social relations since the earliest days of non-Indigenous contact, a dynamic which also complicates and cuts across the localism and self-preservation of Aboriginal cultural practice that Michaels’ work sought to emphasise.

Re-viewing Warlpiri media as an intercultural enterprise

Michaels' descriptions of Warlpiri media practice focus wholly on the actions of Warlpiri participants. Nowhere in his writings does he attempt to analyse the involvement of non-Aboriginal collaborators in this process, nor the local intercultural context of the project's emergence. The importance of this context is reflected clearly in the brief discussion of video conferencing above, but also in the very first television broadcasts that were made at Yuendumu in August 1985. Video-taped recordings of these events are held in the WMA archive. In viewing these tapes, one observes a group of Warlpiri men in what was then the broadcasting room, with a non-Warlpiri voice audible in the background, recognisably that of Adult Educator, Peter Toyne, who was also integrally involved in the inception of WMA, discussing technical problems with the planned transmission. Conversation between the young men is in Warlpiri, with much joking and playing around. When Toyne advises the men that the transmission link has been established and they are 'on air', two Warlpiri men seated side-by-side in front of the camera compose themselves and start talking to each other in English. Their discussion takes a question-answer format, one asks the other, 'What's your name?', 'Where do you live?', 'What do you work?'.

It is striking that Michaels chose not to write about the social relations of these first broadcasts. The conclusion to be drawn from this episode is that the Warlpiri participants seem to have had their own, very particular, assumptions about who their viewing audience was. Surely it was not Warlpiri in their own community they were imagining at the end of television monitors watching their exchange? Alternatively, perhaps it was, and these men were familiar enough with mainstream television formats to be engaging in mimicry? Regardless, it would seem that in this early phase something more complex was occurring than the 'Warlpiri TV for Warlpiri people in the Warlpiri language' that Michaels documented. My aim in drawing attention to these first broadcasts is not to expose Michaels' depictions of Warlpiri media activity as myth-making. Nor do I wish to question the agency of Warlpiri people in this project. What I do want to do, however, is draw attention to a core aspect of these projects that remains largely invisible in Michaels' accounts, that is, their *intercultural* nature — intercultural in terms of who was participating and driving the projects,

intercultural in terms of the traditions being engaged, intercultural in terms of the meanings produced.

There are two associated questions that follow, first, why did Michaels fail to represent the intercultural nature of the media project? And second, why does it matter? Other commentators have pointed out that Michaels allowed his politics to set limits to his analysis (Rowse 1990:178). His was a politics based largely around Black Power concepts imported from the United States, incorporated into the rhetoric of Aboriginal self-determination. Certainly it is important to recognise the historical and political context in which Michaels was writing. In Australia, the mid-1980s marked a period of significant optimism for Aboriginal peoples and their supporters. A new Labor government had been elected under the prime ministership of Bob Hawke and there was hope that the progressiveness of the early 1970s might be revisited. The rhetoric of self-determination was highly charged. This rhetoric put the control of Aboriginal futures unambiguously in Aboriginal hands. There was an associated tendency in much writing of the period to overlook or play down the role of non-Aboriginal advisers, co-ordinators, and managers who replaced the superintendents in the domain of community development.⁵ Sympathetic whites were viewed as playing a transitional role in a newly emergent regime. It was assumed that they would eventually make themselves redundant, with a new generation of Aboriginal leaders stepping into the breach. In line with such thinking, Michaels and Kelly (1984:34) argued in 1984 that Aborigines should 'be acknowledged as the experts in the matter [of video production] and that training, production and distribution assistance by Europeans be reduced to an ancillary role'.

To put it quite simply, to date, such a vision has not been realised. As the use of new media at Yuendumu has expanded to encompass new formats and more complex projects, the number of non-Warlpiri involved has increased as well. There is no sign of this situation changing in the short to medium term. Like so many other aspects of community development, community engagement with new media did not arise spontaneously within an unambiguously Aboriginal domain. It follows that there may be a whole host of complex reasons why Aborigines *want* non-Aborigines to continue being involved in their organisations.

Conclusion

I have suggested that to see Warlpiri engagement with new media in terms of an 'Aboriginal invention' is to overlook the wider social and historical context through which those media have become integrated into daily life at Yuendumu. What is at stake in this misrepresentation? At a purely practical level it underwrites the continued mismatch between government programs and the situation 'on the ground'. If Aboriginalisation is viewed as the attainable end goal of media policy then there is a compelling rationale for not funding managerial and training positions held by non-Indigenous personnel. The last twenty years suggest that Aboriginal media associations survive only where they are creatively entrepreneurial, often through the active collaboration of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal partnerships. Where such creativity is not realised, equipment tends to lie unused in the corner of offices, or is used simply to re-transmit mainstream programming. Acknowledging the intercultural reality of Aboriginal media practice requires a more complex set of interpretations and responses. It requires, first, an understanding that in their interactions with and use of new media Aboriginal people are engaged not simply in the politics of resistance, but rather something more multifaceted and ambiguous. It requires an understanding that media practice occurs side-by-side and at times in spite of competing interests, demands and responsibilities. Through their interactions with new media Warlpiri are caught up in and take hold of a dynamic world, at the same time as their own modes of engagement with that world are altered. In this sense new media enact a contradictory process: they are drivers of social transformation while also providing new mechanisms for holding together social relations, but in new ways, across an expanding social field. These circumstances throw up new choices and new challenges which Warlpiri, like the rest of us, have to negotiate.

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Resonance of tradition

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Notes

1. The first Australian-owned satellite, which would bring national television to much of 'remote' Australia for the first time.
2. For example, see Fischer (1995); Ginsburg (1993, 1995); Hinkson (1996, 2002); Langton (1993); Meadows (1994, 1996); Molnar (1990); Spurgeon (1989); and Tafler (1994).
3. The cost of establishing the Tanami Network was \$1.6m, an amount raised with the assistance of grants from the Janganpa Association Granites Mine Affected Areas Aboriginal Corporation, ATSIC and the Aborigines Benefit Trust Account [see Hinkson (1999), especially chapter 5].
4. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the reasons for the overall decline in use of video conferencing over the four-year period that is reflected in the table. For a detailed description of the history of Tanami Network, see Hinkson (1999).
5. Notable exceptions that explicitly seek to grapple with intercultural relations during this period include Gerritsen (1982) and Trigger (1986).