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Indigenous media is a priority, and not just a luxury

Dot West argues for clear government policy, matched by funding, to strengthen Indigenous media in Australia. In this, the first of a two part article based on her 1993 Boyer Lecture, West sets Indigenous media in context.

Non-Indigenous Australians have held the power of the media for over 200 years giving us various images of Australia including a negative portrayal of its indigenous population.

Looking at the history of Australia is certainly a learning process for non-Aboriginal people who have been educated from a white perspective. Just consider this point alone: when did you become aware that Aboriginal children were being taken away from their families and being raised in missions and institutions? And more importantly when did you find out how Aboriginal people felt about this genocidal treatment? I bet you didn't learn about it in your school books. We learnt it from our own people. So on our Indigenous media outlets - on our radio stations, in our newspapers, in our books, on stage and through television we tell our history.

The Power of the Media

The media has significant power to determine what issues are important, their meaning, and to set the public agenda. It can strongly influence peoples' ideas and values, including their ideas about Aboriginality. At its worst it can help institutionalise racism. White Australians, like all white majorities, institutionalise their own value systems at the expense of minority groups. Every time we're put down as savage or primitive or hopeless, white people are reassured that they are civilized, modern and successful. We're also tired of being the subject of so much hypocritical scrutiny. The mainstream

media talk of the "Aboriginal drinking problem" is nothing but a racist generalisation.

Media stereotypes do more than hurt the feelings and damage the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They are helping to build racist attitudes which I believe can cost lives. Look at the death in Perth of Louis Johnson. In January 1992, on his nineteenth birthday, Louis was deliberately driven over by white youths in a car. One of his killers later admitted this horrendous deed was committed because Louis was black. This was a murder which did not at the time attract sensational reporting or evoke a public outcry.

Racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people were being reinforced and circulated with great intensity in the Western Australian media in the lead up to the murder. From early 1990 the media presented juvenile delinquency and youth crime as having reached the proportions of a major social crisis. Most of the crimes (large or small) were directly attributed to young Aboriginal people, such that any youth related crime in W.A. is now almost automatically assumed to involve Aboriginal people.

But not all media treatment of Aboriginal affairs is negative and biased and we must recognise the good and conscientious work carried out by many journalist who have brought important issues to public attention and are working to raise the level of understanding. There are some examples that come to mind: The movie "Deadly" which provides a look at Aboriginal deaths in custody in a different light, and the documentary "Exile and the

Kingdom" in which the people at Roebourne W.A. tell their own story. The movie "Blackfella's" tells the story of a young Aboriginal man just out of prison trying to go straight, highlighting the many influences in his way.

Indigenous Broadcasts

Just as mainstream media can change attitudes, so can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Media. The Kimberley group which commenced its first broadcast in 1987 on the ABC is an example. The Aboriginal community wanted a way to help maintain their own languages, and portray and inform about their own culture and way of life. They also wanted to counteract the bad publicity their people were receiving in the local paper and the consequent low self-esteem the local Aboriginal people felt when they dealt with the white community. Interestingly enough, when this group first started broadcasting it was the only media group apart from the ABC providing a radio service to this region. So the audience was not only the Aboriginal people but also the non-Aboriginal community. This group didn't just turn white people's thinking about, it also turned the thinking of the Aboriginal community. It made people proud to be Aboriginal in the white dominated community. Over time the service empowered a group of people who once felt powerless in their own country. It instilled pride and built self-esteem amongst the young and old.

This is just one example in the very short time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been involved in the

Media Industry. We now have 6 Aboriginal radio stations licensed, about another 6 groups working towards a licence, about 90 remote communities licensed to deliver both radio and television services, various newspapers, a television station, many performers in all fields of the arts, authors, playwrights, a publishing house and the list goes on.

Language

Our role in the media industry is not just to inform our own people but also to educate and inform non Aboriginal people. We report on the news and current affairs which is relevant to our people, we tell of what's going on in the languages of our area or in a more easily understood form of English. We try to cut out what we call high English. Down to earth language is all that is needed. We are not out to impress people, we are out to inform, to communicate. With high English it's more than likely you will fail to communicate. For example we don't say "legislation" when "law" will do.

Indigenous Media in Australia has a big role in maintaining our languages. At the time of invasion there were about 250 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. There are now fewer than 90 still in use, and not all of them are spoken as first languages.

The Government Broadcasters

The Federal Government already funds two media services - the ABC and the SBS. From our point of view, that's two networks largely for non-Indigenous Australians. We want a third network for and about Indigenous Australians. Admittedly both services have provided very good programs for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but it hasn't been often enough, nor localised enough. The SBS ensures that immigrants to this country are able to maintain and broadcast their own languages and inform Australia about their culture. This alone was certainly a credit to the Federal Government for its insight and appreciation of other cultures but once again it forgot the diverse needs of its own Indigenous culture.

The population of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is extremely diverse in its culture with many different languages spoken. So can you imagine these national media groups trying to service Australia's Indigenous people. The SBS only broadcasts in the capital cities.

The ABC realised it couldn't cater to all of Australia's Indigenous peoples. This

realisation was also formally recognised through the DIX report in 1981/2, a review document on the ABC. The report basically recognised that cultural diversity came within the ABC's broadcast responsibility. The Corporation began to allow different Aboriginal media groups to have access to the ABC's radio airwaves.

This arrangement commenced in 1981/2 when the ABC purchased radio programs from C.A.A.M.A. (the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) and then broadcast them under ABC control. In 1985 the first unsupervised access on the ABC was undertaken by the Torres Strait Islanders and in the same year Aboriginal

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people in Perth were broadcasting on the ABC. In 1987 and 1988 Aboriginal access extended to the Kimberley region where groups could broadcast within their own regions and in their own languages. This arrangement was not met very favourably by some bureaucrats. There are now 3 radio stations in the Kimberley producing and presenting about 35 hours of Aboriginal programs to the region via the ABC.

Perspective

Australians were experimenting with radio as far back as 1905 and the first station 2SB in Sydney began broadcasting in November 1923. But it wasn't until June 1976 when Melbourne's station 3CR broadcast the country's first Aboriginal radio program. One month later 2XX in Canberra transmitted Australia's second Aboriginal radio show. So it took 53 years for our voice to be heard in our own programs, and this came about initially through the Public and community radio stations which only started operating in the mid seventies.

There are now over 100 licenced community radio stations and about 30 of them have some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. These include 6 stations owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media organisations in Alice Springs, Brisbane, Townsville, Port Augusta, Perth and Kununurra.

We now have over 500 hours a week of Indigenous radio being produced by Indigenous people. Unfortunately, TV presents a different story. Less than 1% of Australia's television programs are produced by Indigenous people.

Policy and Training

We have been able to apply our talents to the media industry like a duck takes to water. Many Indigenous media workers have developed great broadcasting and production skills. There has been a lack of clear policy and direction from government. There has been very little or no formal training at all. But the Indigenous media industry feels it's essential to provide training opportunities for our people in this field of work. Not only tertiary education but also practical training in all areas of the industry from management and journalism to technical skills. There still needs to be a more concentrated effort made to increase the numbers and ensure that all positions within our own organisations are occupied by Indigenous people.

It is estimated that over 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in community media either as employed staff or volunteers. The ABC currently employ 73 and SBS 16 Indigenous Australians in various fields of their operations. But you can count on one hand the number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders employed in the commercial electronic media, and the numbers for the print media are even lower.

The government's response to some of the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody is a prime example of how low on the priority list Indigenous Media is. Recommendation 205 was split into two parts, the first part emphasising the importance of Indigenous Media and recommending further funding where necessary. The second part stressed the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be employed in mainstream media and this media to set up codes of practice for use when reporting about Indigenous Australians. The Federal Government has provided funds to

mainstream media to train Indigenous people and has also funded a National meeting to address the codes of practice issue. But on the other hand the Indigenous media industry is still struggling for adequate funding, and some organisations have been operating on the smell of an oily rag. To this date no money has been provided to Indigenous Media from the Deaths in Custody funding. It appears that white industry once again has claimed black dollars.

We've had to convince our own people and the major funding bodies that Indigenous media is a priority, and not just a luxury. We've had to compete for limited funds while issues like health and education are clearly important priorities. *The second half of this article, which outlines the mechanisms for establishing a national Indigenous media service, will be published in the next edition.*

Dot West is Chairperson of NIMAA, Training and Broadcasting Co-ordinator for the Broome Aboriginal Media Association, and presents a weekly program on Radio Goolarri in Broome.

The formidable process of reform

Duncan Kerr outlines the Federal Government's proposed reforms to the Copyright Act.

I am acutely aware that the protection of intellectual property under the Copyright Act and through International Conventions is critical for the maintenance and development of Australia as a significant force in our region and throughout the world. We are at the edge of a technological revolution which will change the fundamental nature of copyright. To quote one lawyer who remains anonymous, "copyright must be the tollgate to the new information super highways".

The Government's intentions have been signalled: to review rental of sound recordings in the light of technological change; enact a workable moral rights scheme for creators; review the impact of the growing number of copyright royalty collecting societies; and implement parallel importation of sound recordings.

Within the next few weeks, Bob McMullan (responsible for copyright policy regarding the arts) and I will release a paper on new moral rights legislation. By that time we will have taken to cabinet proposals for a new tax-based scheme for a

levy on blank audio recording media. Cabinet will have before it my proposed amendments to the Act to streamline the procedure for payment by Governments for use of private copyright material, particularly photocopying. A little further down the track, the Government will address Copyright Law Review Committee Reports on protection of computer software and databases and the report on employed journalist's copyright. Other areas of Copyright Law under review include Performer's Rights and Government Copyright in Legislation.

The Copyright Convergence Group

In order to deal with the consequences of the convergence of the telecommunications, broadcasting, computing, entertainment and information industries, we need to understand the technological environment. To this end, the Transport and Communications portfolio has recently initiated a communications future project, as announced by David Beddall, which is