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## **Conducting conversations: exploring the audience-producer relationship in Indigenous media research**

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### **Abstract**

A continuing failure by the broader public sphere to account for Indigenous cultural needs has played a central role in the development of alternative media systems and alternative public spheres, including Indigenous public spheres. The significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous media process, form and content is further evidence for their existence. In this paper, I want to canvass some of the ideas around Indigenous media and research approaches that have begun to coalesce around Indigenous audiences in Australasia. It sets such media processes apart from the mainstream where the presence of a barrier largely remains a defining characteristic of the media-audience relationship.

**Keywords:** empowerment, audience research, Indigenous media, qualitative research, research methodology

### **Introduction**

A key influence on the quest by Indigenous people for empowerment at various levels — including access to media on their own terms — is a continuing failure by the broader public sphere to account for Indigenous cultural needs. This has played a central role in the development of alternative media systems and alternative public spheres, including Indigenous public spheres (Meadows 2005). Audience reception has powerful political and cultural implications so it is crucial to explore the nature of the relationship between audiences and producers if we are to better understand the processes involved in this particular cultural realm (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009; Meadows 2009a; Meadows 2009b). Canadian researcher Gail Valaskakis (1993) coined the term 'parallel voices' to illustrate the idea of separate universes inhabited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples sharing virtually the same spaces — and increasingly, the same communication technologies. The significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous media processes, forms and content are further evidence for the existence and significance of active Indigenous public spheres. But how are these processes defined and what relationship do they have with the broader public sphere?

In general terms, Indigenous media tend to serve communities which are constituted differently to other community media cohorts. And arguably, much of this definition relates directly to perceptions of identity.

This stems from extended forms of kinship which tend to play a more central role in identifying and defining such communities. There's also a tendency for the existence of smaller 'communities of interest' in the Indigenous world, defined by 'the fatal diversity' of both language and culture (Anderson 1984; Molnar and Meadows 2001). There is also strong evidence from Australia of a collapse of the traditional boundary between Indigenous audiences and producers—a trait that is not as evident in the broader community media sector (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009).

When Western forms of journalism and mass print media first emerged around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were embedded in the processes of the public sphere. People typically tended to gather in public spaces creating a meeting place of ideas. Media of the day reported directly on this public sphere activity and perhaps because of the limited nature of what then constituted 'the public', could be held directly accountable by their audiences. The relationship between producers and audiences was, by definition, an intimate one with few of the barriers that define both journalism and mass media today. As Carey (1997, 238) reminds us, public spaces were places where public opinion was formed and where the media 'reflected and animated public conversation'. In contrast, modern journalism and mass media *form* public opinion rather than report on it. The transformation of journalism and media from a public to an independent activity has effectively displaced the lines of accountability which traditionally linked journalists (producers) with their readers, and later, their listeners and viewers. This has resulted in a barrier — both symbolic and actual — between producers and their audiences in mainstream media. The separation of producers and audiences in mainstream media practices remains despite an illusion of primarily Internet-based interactivity.

Despite this trajectory in mainstream media, the more intimate relationships that once linked producers and audiences remains a defining characteristic of Indigenous media — and some other forms of community media — which rely on the existence of strong lines of accountability. This is evidence for the existence of Indigenous (and community) public spheres (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2003; Meadows 2005; Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007). Indigenous media (like some other forms of community media) are diverse spaces where citizens are encouraged to speak and listen differently. The Indigenous public spheres that are created in this environment, in turn, interact or overlap with the broader public sphere where they facilitate introduction of alternative viewpoints, thus enabling predominant ideas and assumptions to be challenged (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2003; Meadows 2005).

Investigating the nature of the relationship between Indigenous audiences and producers of their media also suggests a need for us to reflect on our own practices more broadly in both responding to and engaging with Indigenous communities globally. This must necessarily include the ways in which we conduct research. In this paper, I want to canvass some of the ideas around the definition of Indigenous

media and research approaches that have emerged from more than two decades of engagement with this media sector, locally and internationally.

### **The place of Indigenous media**

Although there is no available quantifiable data on audiences for Indigenous media, qualitative research spanning more than two decades in Australia and Canada, in particular, suggest extremely high levels of audience participation in communities where locally-produced media are available and active (Valaskakis, Robbins & Wilson 1981; Valaskakis 1992; Wilson 1993; Meadows & van Vuuren 1998; Meadows 2001; Roth 2005; Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009; Meadows 2009a; Meadows 2009b). In Australia, around 100 licensed Indigenous radio and television stations serve their audiences in remote parts of the country with a further 25 radio stations broadcasting to regional and urban communities (AICA 2010). Most of the small, remote stations are engaged in re-transmitting available satellite television programming, both mainstream- and community-produced, emerging from a small number of regionally-based Remote Indigenous Media Organisations. There is one Indigenous-owned commercial radio station and one commercial television station, called *Imparja*, based in Alice Springs in central Australia. In addition to the community stations, there are two Indigenous radio networks—the National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and the National Indigenous News Service (NINS)—and two regular national newspapers, the *Koori Mail* and the *National Indigenous Times*.

From July 2007, Australia's first national Indigenous television service (NITV) was launched, unfortunately displacing an existing Indigenous community television network (ICTV) because of claimed funding and spectrum scarcity. Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) began broadcasting in 2001 on a spare *Imparja* satellite channel to provide a service to remote Indigenous communities in central and northern Australia. This innovative service evolved from the first experiments with local video in communities at Pukutja (Ernabella) and Yuendumu in central Australia in the early 1980s. Like its predecessors, ICTV featured close to 100 percent Indigenous content, produced mostly by small bush communities and mostly in local or regional languages without subtitles (Molnar and Meadows 2001; Meadows et al 2007). Despite its unpopular move off air, ICTV re-launched late in 2009 using the Internet as its main transmission vehicle, re-badged as *Indigitube* (<http://www.indigitube.com.au/>). Continuing problems for NITV include an uncertain funding regime and the fact that most of Australia's television audience cannot watch it because of its limited availability through community channel 31 and/or pay TV. In mid-2009, around one-third of Australian households subscribed to pay TV (Paul Budde Communications 2010). Attempts to include some ICTV programming on NITV failed when negotiations broke down in 2009. From the beginning of NITV, the

process that led to its establishment has come in for significant criticism from audiences, remote area producers and analysts (Meadows et al 2007; Rijavec 2007; Rennie and Featherstone 2008). A schism between NITV producers and their audiences has emerged, particularly in regional and remote Australia. National Indigenous Television (<http://nitv.org.au/>) was awarded AU\$15 million for a further 12 months' operation in July 2010. In 2007-2008, around 125 Indigenous community radio stations and six Remote Indigenous Media Organisations — producing the vast majority of local programming in a variety of Indigenous languages and English — shared additional federal government funding of just under AU\$20 million (DCITA 2007). At the time of writing, a national review of Indigenous broadcasting was underway (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010).

In New Zealand, the government-funded Maori Television network (<http://www.maoritelevision.com/default.aspx>) received around NZ\$37 million in 2008 with 21 iwi (local tribal community) radio stations (<http://www.irirangi.net/>) sharing an additional NZ\$8 million for that year. Like criticism levelled at NITV across the Tasman Sea, some Maori community radio workers have suggested that Maori TV has tended to overlook important community connections with iwi stations and local communities. General Manager of News and Current Affairs for Maori TV, Te Anga Nathan, acknowledges the crucial importance of protocols for Maori TV news workers in gathering information from local communities. This includes, for example, seeking permission from local Maori community governing bodies—the marae—before running stories on sensitive topics. He stresses the importance of contextualising news stories, for example, with reference to traditional Maori legends where appropriate: a news story about dogs, for example, would make reference to the several Maori traditional stories involving the animals (Nathan 2010). This has clearly struck a chord with around 90 percent of Maori viewers reporting they have watched the channel at some point. The network reaches 90 percent of the general population on a weekly basis, most of whom prefer the documentaries. While young viewers tend to be drifting away from Maori TV gradually, they have abandoned iwi radio in droves — down to 35 percent in 2008 from a high of 60 percent two years earlier. This is most likely reflects the falling numbers of young Maori who report speaking *te reo* (their language) 'most of the time' (TNS Conversa 2009).

### **Audiences**

Much has been written and spoken about Indigenous media in terms of their structure and process but until recently, little has included the views of their audiences. The dominant body of knowledge relating to Indigenous video production, in particular, has been influenced by visual anthropology and has tended to focus on 'traditional' Indigenous communities, most often in remote areas. This has been linked to ideas

that the very nature of 'remoteness' brings with it an implied 'traditional purity' where it is perceived that culture and languages are 'strong' (Molnar and Meadows 2001). Although this has tended to ignore the places where most Indigenous people live — in urban areas — it suggests a need to consider Indigenous media in terms of the social relations of production. In central Australia in the 1980s, American anthropologist Eric Michaels' work was influential in directing attention to the importance of the cultural production processes involved in 'inventing' Aboriginal television in the remote Indigenous communities of Yuendumu and Ernabella or Pukatja. Within the paradigm of visual anthropology, some have extended this into more detailed investigations around the complex relationships between Indigenous people and their media in other — usually remote — locations (Ginsburg 1991; Ginsburg 1993; Ginsburg 2000; Ginsburg 2006; Deger 2007). More recent work by Rennie and Featherstone (2008) has explored the policy environment around the launch of NITV (at the expense of ICTV) through the lenses of culture, history and politics. It emphasises the importance of acknowledging the central role played by media using local Indigenous languages for communities where English is a second, third or fourth language — and highlights the puzzling policy response that saw the multilingual Indigenous community television service, ICTV, replaced by a national television service broadcasting in English. The need for a national Indigenous television service is not in dispute — the problem lies in the inability of NITV to provide a service for remote Indigenous communities along with a lack of government commitment to supporting a diverse and sustainable Indigenous media sector (Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007). Unlike both New Zealand and Canada, Australia has yet to acknowledge the special place of Indigenous languages and cultures in its Broadcasting Services Act.

Despite these obstacles, Indigenous media production beyond the remote communities reveals a broader picture of diversity (Meadows and Molnar 2002; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows 2009). The focus on remote Indigenous media production has generally also tended to give language a powerful authorising role, making it 'an essential marker' of Indigenousness. The danger is that it diminishes the status of the majority of Indigenous peoples who tend to live in urban centres where they do not — or cannot — speak their original languages. The situation in New Zealand is slightly different where the estimated 120,000 Maori speakers (out of 500,000 Maori) are in two demographics: either over 75 or under 30 (Nathan 2010). And while around two thirds of Maori have some understanding of their language, the proportion of young Maori speaking *te reo* 'most of the time' has fallen significantly in the past three years (TNS Conversa 2009). Martin-Barbero (1988, 459) reminds us of the long-standing populist-romantic links between the 'the indigenous', 'the original', and 'the primitive' which made the idea of 'Indigenous' irreconcilable with modernity, concluding that 'the indigenous was thus identified with a kind of pre-reality, static, without development'. Mainstream media representations of Indigenous people tend to remain locked within these

narrow frames of reference, almost always negative and usually associated with anti-social activities (Jakubowicz and Seneviratne 1996; Hippocrates, Meadows & van Vuuren 1996; Meadows 2001; Ang, Brand, Noble & Wilding 2000).

Regardless, it is clear from a growing archive of research from around the world that Indigenous media produced in remote, regional and urban environments have the capacity not only to offer alternative ideas and assumptions about the world that enable their audiences to make sense of their places within it, but also to offer a critique of mainstream media processes (Roth and Valaskakis 1989: 233; Meadows 1993; 2001; Rankine and McCreanor 2004; Wilson and Stewart 2008; Rennie and Featherstone 2008). Speaking from a Native Canadian perspective, Valaskakis (1993) offers this assessment of the power of locally-produced media:

These representations and narratives are articulated in the processes of experiencing and forming community within the power relations of different groups and interests. Like the terrain of social struggle in which it is articulated, identity is continually contested and reconstructed. It is built and re-built in the discursive negotiation of complex alliances and relations within the heterogeneity of community; in discourse which is based not in unity or belonging, but in transformation and difference. Within this understanding, representations and cultural narratives are central sites of cultural struggle.

Langton, too, (1993) has underlined the importance of media in the formation of identity, arguing that a definition based on dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is the most productive. This shared concept of identity is sustainable and relates more closely to the dynamic nature of culture and the central role played by media that are locally produced and controlled. Similar notions of identity and their relationship with media production have emerged from research involving the Indigenous peoples of Scandinavia — the Sami (Pietikäinen & Dufva 2006; Pietikäinen 2008, 175).

Regardless of where Indigenous people in Australia live, locally-produced media are better attuned to the specific cultural and linguistic needs of the communities they serve. Media in these circumstances represent a pivotal cultural resource — a hub around which all community activity is potentially centred, creating and sustaining community public spheres. But what is very clear from research that has involved a wide range of communities is that Indigenous people in Australia and elsewhere overwhelmingly see *their* media playing a central role in *their* cultural survival, irrespective of location (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009; Meadows 2009b).

### **The audience-producer relationship**

Almost by definition, mainstream media rely on the *inability* of audiences to engage with producers at virtually all levels of the production process. Despite claims of interactivity made possible by new media forms, blogs and other communication formats rely heavily on existing information, most often produced by mainstream sources (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun & Jeong 2007). Mainstream media in all their forms represent a one-way flow of information from producers to audiences — or, perhaps more accurately in the case of commercial media, from advertisers to audiences. Indeed 'editorial interference' is a term often used by news organisations to describe levels of audience engagement that go beyond the narrow confines of mainstream journalism practice. Community media — and Indigenous media in particular — present a very different picture.

The first suggestions of the absence of a barrier between audiences and producers in Indigenous community media production emerged in the mid-1980s from research in central Australia (Michaels 1986) and a few years later from work in northern Canada (Kulchyski 1989). By working within a broad anthropological framework, Michaels found evidence of what he termed a 'Brechtian violation of the producer/audience boundary' in Indigenous video production (1986; 1990, 25). Around the same time, Canadian sociologist Peter Kulchyski (1989) argued that a lack of 'performers' on Inuit-produced television in the Arctic supported something similar. Although others in varied locations have alluded to this characteristic (Barclay 1990; Meadows 1994; Mushengyezi 2003; Hemple 2004; Spitulnik 2004), it has not been systematically explored with a range of audiences until recently.

Audience commentaries gathered during a two-year study of Indigenous broadcasting in Australia from 2004-2006 offer strong support for the idea that a significant weakening — or absence — of a barrier between audiences and producers is a key characteristic of Indigenous media. The important element here is that this relationship is not confined to Indigenous media audiences and producers in remote locations — it is a particular characteristic of the processes of Indigenous radio and television production more generally, where it is firmly community-based. The very nature of this relationship defines Indigenous media wherever they may be sited. This process is central to the operation and sustainability of Indigenous public spheres (Meadows 2005; Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009).

Although Indigenous voices remain suppressed in mainstream news coverage of events in which they are deeply implicated, Indigenous agency has been a crucial element of a global push for media access by Indigenous communities. Native Canadian theorist Gail Valaskakis coined the term 'parallel voices' to illustrate the idea of separate universes inhabited by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples:

As discursive constructions with different ideologies and meanings, representations and narratives are formed in lived experience and public text, in the discourse of everyday action and events —

individual and collective, dynamic and diachronic, interactional and mediated. This conceptual framework locates artistic and media images within the ideological struggle of power relations and the dynamic process of building individual and collective identity. And for Indians, this identity has drawn forcefully on the power and purpose of Native narrative (Valaskakis 1993).

At the same time, an understanding of Indigenous media process offers a critique of the mainstream. Roth and Valaskakis suggest that this approach might provide a clue as to 'how to electronically recuperate public discourse and reconstitute public space in ways that will bear upon the future of...society' (1989, 233). Reconceptualising the nature of the relationship between Indigenous audiences and producers — and, by inference, Indigenous and non-Indigenous media processes — suggests a need for us to reflect on our own practices in engaging with Indigenous communities more broadly: in particular, as researchers.

### **Whose story is it?**

Indigenous media should be seen, then, as representing a specific form of cultural production, defined by the absence or collapse of an audience-producer boundary. If this is so, what might it mean for the ways in which we investigate those very processes? Earlier, I alluded to the contributions various scholars from visual anthropology have made to our understanding of the processes involved — including those involving both 'others' and ourselves. A notion of reciprocity — an exchange — is central to the maintenance of social relations within Indigenous communities but has been slow to filter through to some elements of the research community. Almost two decades ago in 1991, ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall — who coined the title of this section of the paper — highlighted some of the challenges:

If we keep writing anthropology and making films today, we do so with a greater awareness of the politics and ethics of representation. But this awareness can also lead to a condescending and moralistic strain of ethnocentrism. In our preoccupation with the part others play in our cultural affairs we may be less likely to pay attention to the part we play in theirs (MacDougall 1998, 150).

While particular elements of Indigenous cultural production are significant, we should be careful not to use them to define *all* production because it runs the risk of ignoring the great cultural diversity which exists between and within Indigenous communities. It tends to deny cultural strength and diversity along with the possibility of sophisticated responses by communities — and individuals — to their own unique social, political and cultural circumstances (MacDougall 1987,54).

Andrea Medrado's work in the Brazilian *favela* has highlighted the importance of enlisting community-based ideas and practices as a core of the research process. Adopting a broad ethnographic approach, she immersed herself in the communities in question, engaging with audiences for local 'lamp post' radio in a

variety of ways: family visits; interviews; participant observation; a creative writing course; and participatory methods using photography, writing and recording of radio shows (Medrado 2007). One of her case studies — Radio Pop Sam — got its messages out to the local community through a system of 22 loudspeakers attached to lamp posts in the *favela*. Other similar stations used roving loudspeakers on cars and motorbikes to reach their audiences. Her continuing investigations have revealed a melange of content types being produced — local advertisements, music, public announcements, public health messages — revealing close relationships with neighbourhood associations. In the many qualitative responses she has elicited from audiences, there is evidence here, too, of a weakening of an audience-producer barrier (Medrado 2007). But what is most important in her work is that she focuses on the *process* rather than on the media involved. The programs produced by community media may be less important in understanding the social relations that trigger a community's desire to communicate (Tomaselli & Prinsloo 1990; Hochheimer 1999; Meadows, Forde, Ewart & Foxwell 2007).

Awareness of the existence of such a relationship strongly suggests the need for a research methodology that parallels this process, or at least sets out to engage with it as seamlessly as possible. In such an environment, reciprocity becomes a key element. Working with Indigenous (or other tightly-knit local) communities engaged in media production places researchers from whatever discipline in a good position to work as mediators between communities and external agencies like governments and NGOs. Wickett (2007, 139) sees an even greater obligation on those with expertise in media production who are 'well-placed to command a new role in development journalism and advocacy to help bridge the cultural and communication gap between rich and poor worlds'. I doubt whether any well-prepared researcher would venture into Indigenous communities nowadays without some knowledge of the importance of reciprocity and protocols along with ways of managing the terms of engagement. Without adopting such an approach, most would be asked — usually politely — to leave.

Between 2004 and 2006, I was involved in the first national audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector. My particular responsibility was to engage with Indigenous media audiences from varied locations across the country. Working closely with senior Indigenous researcher, Derek Flucker, and despite the existing relationships I had with members of the Indigenous media sector — built up over 20 years — it took almost 18 months of 'quiet negotiation' before we agreed on which communities would be involved in the study and the terms on which this would be managed. These often delicate negotiations across cultural boundaries constantly reminded us not only of our ethical obligations as researchers, but also of the importance of maintaining this dialogue within the broad philosophical frameworks of Indigenous cultural production. It was clear from previous studies — reinforced by the audience research —

that community information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate *existing* community needs, a process eloquently summarized by Ramirez (2001, 327):

A community defines what it wants to be, where it wants to go, and ICTs are tools to be harnessed towards those agreements. ICTs are part of a context, along with global markets, jobs, interest rates, tariffs, regulations, political parties, families, weather, and disease. They can be harnessed and put to work to reaffirm where a community wants to be. What is true, however, is that they create a new environment that was not there before...

And like ICTs, our presence as researchers in communities also created a new environment. From the very beginning, we had to constantly address the question so eloquently framed by David MacDougall at the start of this section of the paper: 'Whose story is it?'

The Indigenous fieldwork for the Australian community broadcasting audience project involved several approaches designed to capture the diversity of audiences we knew existed. We realised that the use of formal focus groups would be limited, given that Indigenous people — particularly those in remote Australia — do not tend to gather in one place, particularly at the behest of researchers: either they have more important social obligations or are hesitant about participating in 'yet another research project' from which they can realistically expect no outcomes. To overcome the problem of establishing trust with interviewees, we employed local Indigenous people — most often, Indigenous media workers — to help in the interviewing process as mediators, utilising their specialist local knowledge. From the earliest days of Native television in Canada a similar approach has been used in seeking information about audiences across the Arctic (Wilson 1993; Roth 2005). In our case, the presence and clear 'authorisation' of the project by Indigenous people clearly helped to put Indigenous interviewees at ease and minimized the potential for us to be told what people *thought* we wanted to hear — one of the many pitfalls identified in this kind of cross-cultural research in Australia (von Sturmer 1981, 27-30; Brady 1981; Lyons 1981, 1983; Eades 1985; Michaels 1985, 1986; Roy Morgan Research 1995; Meadows 2002; Meadows 2009a, 2009b; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009).

We organized some focus groups where it was appropriate — at metropolitan and larger regional radio stations — while in smaller and more remote locations we conducted either one-on-one or small group conversations. The fieldwork involved a great deal of travel to metropolitan, regional and remote locations — sometimes several times — to seek permission to visit particular communities. In remote areas, we tapped into existing cultural events such as music, dance and video festivals and existing community timeframes rather than attempting to organise a stand-alone event of our own. This approach emerged based on advice from Indigenous participants and prior research experiences (Meadows 1988; 1994; Meadows and van Vuuren 1998; Molnar and Meadows 2001; Meadows & Molnar 2002). This greatly

enhanced our chances of accessing a large number of people *on their own terms* and at locations where they were generally more relaxed and open to the research process (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009). Locally-based Indigenous research assistants ensured we were introduced to 'ordinary' community members in the 'correct' way according to local protocols, fostering a level of trust and 'authorization'. We were conscious, too, of the need for reciprocity — a form of gift exchange or sharing — in our dealings with individuals and communities (Morris & Meadows 2000; Marmot 2004; Meadows 2005; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009). It also meant the local community received something back: a wage for a community member to assist with the project and the associated work experience gained; counselling on education and other matters within our areas of expertise; or advice on media training opportunities and techniques. In the few communities where we were unable to locate a local research assistant we found it very difficult — impossible in one — to collect substantial data because there was simply no-one to 'authorise' our presence (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between Indigenous media and their audiences defines them both and it is the very nature of this relationship that should inform the ways in which we engage with such communities as scholars. It should determine the role and nature of the methods we choose and should be underpinned by other important elements of community social structure — reciprocity, for example. Albeit a world away from Indigenous Australia, Andrea Medrado's experiences in the Brazilian *favela* is illustrative of how this approach can be shaped in relation to other social and cultural contexts. Perhaps as importantly, this approach necessarily involves reflection on our own assumed — either inadvertently or deliberately — positions of power as representatives of academic institutions structured largely on Western epistemologies. Our sometimes tortuous pathways through university administrivia and bureaucracy should be underpinned by the central recurring research question: whose story is it?

In our Australian audience study, our engagement with Indigenous audiences was built on a research approach in keeping with the very nature of the communities we sought to include in the process; the methods we adopted for the audience study were shaped by the very structures of Indigenous media organisations and their communities. The long lead-in time before fieldwork began enabled consideration of the cultural contexts in which Indigenous media producers and their audiences interact — and, in particular, recognition and acknowledgement of the nature of the audience-producer relationships involved. This necessitated the application of a flexible qualitative methodology that encouraged exploration of the 'hard surfaces' — the 'supports, vehicles and mechanisms' (Mercer 1989, 13) — of Indigenous media production

and reception by taking into account the 'political, economic and stratificatory realities' involved (Geertz 1973, 30).

What we were seeking was a conversation with audiences about their media. An exchange. A dialogue. Given the constraints that limit all research endeavours — particularly cross cultural encounters — our approach was able to minimise some of the inevitable challenges. I suggest that the incorporation and involvement of Indigenous people in the research process at all levels was the major reason for its success.

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