12

BLACKFELLA LISTENING TO BLACKFELLA

Theorising Indigenous community broadcasting

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Introduction

At the centre of life in Western democracies are the public spheres in which private citizens engage with issues that concern them. This activity takes place in varied settings – classrooms, associations, unions, community meetings, and in provincial and national arenas, including the media. While most citizens take access to these spaces for granted, a great many 'others' are systematically excluded. The advent of mass democracy and mass media has seen the concept of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1984) – the nation – meld into one which conceives of *societies* made up of multiple-connected public spheres. These spheres have evolved in unique social, political, economic and cultural contexts. In this discussion, I want to consider the idea of Indigenous public spheres and their potential to both empower and inform.

Rather than adopting the idea of a single, all-encompassing public sphere, we should think of the existence of a series of parallel and overlapping public spheres – spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities of importance to them. Each of us simultaneously has membership in several different public spheres – or public arenas – moving between and within them in our everyday lives according to desire and obligation. In this way, these multiple spheres of activity articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere, where they are able to interact "across lines of cultural diversity" (Fraser, 1993: 13; see also Avison and Meadows, 2000; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2003, 2009; Meadows, 2005).

However, despite the existence of alternative ideas and assumptions, there is no guarantee that any will be taken up as part of a broader democratic process such as policymaking, for example. Indeed, the ephemeral nature of the policy process means that change might occur only "when the stars align" (Meadows, 2012).

The fear of *further* cultural and language loss is fuelling the impetus for the development of Indigenous media production globally. Western-style media for most Indigenous people represent a double-edged sword. Although sometimes identified

as the vanguard of cultural imperialism, media technologies and media practices have the *potential* to be powerful community cultural resources enabling public sphere activity (Michaels, 1986; Kulchyski, 1989; Meadows, 1994, 1995). A range of authors have argued that alternative media practices extend contemporary ideas of the public sphere and democracy (Downing, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001; Atton, 2002; Forde, Meadows and Foxwell, 2002; Rennie, 2002; Howley, 2005; Meadows et al., 2007; Chitty and Rattichalkalakorn, 2007; Kidd, Stein and Rodríguez, 2007; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009; Forde, 2011). This can be seen in Indigenous media producers appropriating various media technologies to suit their own social and cultural needs. The basis for successful applications of media technologies is 'functionality' – in other words, there must be a clear benefit flowing from the adoption of such technologies. This is especially the case in remote Indigenous communities, which are commonly required to confront issues of survival on a daily basis (Meadows and Morris, 2003). Indigenous media production – or "invention", as Michaels (1986) has described it – suggests the need to reconceptualise the notion of the public sphere through an examination of the unique relationship between Indigenous media producers and their audiences.

A wide range of audiences access Indigenous radio and television in Australia. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous listeners and viewers say these unique services offer an essential service to communities and play a central organising role in community life. Indigenous radio and television help maintain social networks and play a strong educative role in communities, particularly for young people. These media offer an alternative source of news and information which avoids stereotyping Indigenous people and issues, thus helping break down inaccurate perceptions prevalent in mainstream Australia. The Indigenous media sector also represents crucial platforms for specialist music and dance (Meadows et al., 2007; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009).

Audiences for Indigenous radio and television around Australia define them in many ways (Meadows et al., 2007: 54); for example: "the electronic message stick of the new millennium"; "our voice"; the "Murri grapevine" ('Murri' is a term used by Indigenous people in Queensland to describe themselves); and the "bush telegraph". One passionate listener on Palm Island in far north Queensland explained simply: "Because it's blackfella listening to blackfella. You know you want to communicate with them. You know!"

There is little doubt of the globalising impact of mainstream media to transform the wider public sphere, and it is within such a context that Indigenous people continue to seek access to their own media for political, educational and cultural reasons. Global media processes have perhaps inadvertently acted as a catalyst for grassroots' action, and many disadvantaged groups have recognised the potential of a wide range of media as tools for cultural and political intervention – effectively, allowing the dispossessed to "speak as well as hear" (Girard, 1992: 2). In Australia, this response has emerged as a result of several influences – combating stereotypes, addressing information gaps in non-Indigenous society, and reinforcing local community languages and cultures. The impact on Indigenous communities who are able to hear their own voices and languages is profound (Michaels, 1986; Meadows, 1993, 2001; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1999; Productivity Commission, 2000;

Molnar and Meadows, 2001; Meadows et al., 2007; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009; Meadows and Foxwell, 2011).

Audiences for Indigenous broadcasting in Australia identify empowerment as a central element of the nature of this relationship, and thus the success of Indigenous-produced media in providing a first level of service to their many and varied communities. It highlights the importance of a process of cultural resource management that is a defining characteristic of Indigenous broadcasting in communities where community media are active (Meadows, 2001). Grossberg (1987: 95) defines empowerment as "the enablement of particular practices, that is ... the conditions of possibility that enable a particular practice or statement to exist in a specific social context and to enable people to live their lives in different ways". It is clear from recent studies of Indigenous broadcasting audiences that this process is a catalyst for community organisation around communication hubs such as community radio and television stations.

In this chapter, I want to consider some of the theoretical issues around the public sphere and the ways in which Indigenous media producers and audiences have created spaces for themselves at the level of not only local, but also broader community activity.

Indigenous media and their audiences in Australia

Community radio and television remain the major communications outlet for Indigenous voices in Australia, with more than 100 licensed radio stations in remote regions and a further 20 radio stations in regional and urban areas producing around 1,400 hours of Indigenous content weekly. This includes two Indigenous radio networks: the satellite-delivered National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and the National Indigenous News Service (NINS) (Molnar and Meadows, 2001; Community Broadcasting Foundation, 2009).

In addition, in 2012, 80 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) produced radio and/or television content for isolated communities in various parts of the continent. These RIBS units also re-broadcast a National Indigenous Television (NITV) service, launched in 2007. Most of the small stations based in remote townships are engaged in re-transmitting available satellite programming, both mainstream and community produced. In 1988, Imparja Television became the first Indigenous-owned and -managed *commercial* television service in Australia and, arguably, the world. However, since its launch, largely for financial reasons, Imparja has been able to produce minimal Indigenous content.

An Aboriginal-owned and -run Indigenous community television service, ICTV, began broadcasting to several remote regions in central, northern and western Australia from one of Imparja's spare satellite channels in 2001. This innovative service featured close to 100 percent Indigenous content, produced mostly by small bush communities and often in the 15–20 local or regional Aboriginal languages which are still active. It was initiated by Aboriginal-controlled Pitjantjatjara-Yunkantjatjara (PY) Media and produced around 300 hours of new content annually from 2005 on. ICTV ran on an annual budget of about AU$70,000 and included contributions from PY Media, Pintubi-Amatyerre-Warlpiri (PAW) Media, Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM), Ngaanyatjarra Media, Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasters Association

(TEABBA) and other local Indigenous producers. Former PY Media general manager Will Rogers (personal communication, email, 18 August 2009) reflects on the ICTV experience:

> ICTV was a real project started from the grassroots; an opportunity for the unheard to have the freedom to say what it needed to. Another funny thing was, what was said was OK – it wasn't said in anger but just an opportunity to say something and show the pride of people that live in the bush and their lifestyles.

A federal government policy decision led to the launch of NITV in 2007, displacing ICTV from the airwaves. This caused great concern for remote Indigenous media audiences at the time but has led to some creative responses, including the launch of *Indigitube*, a database of Indigenous-produced videos available for viewing online. NITV merged with Australia's national multicultural broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), in December 2012 and began transmitting through one of its digital channels. Following some intense lobbying by the Indigenous Remote Communication Association (IRCA), ICTV re-launched on its own digital television channel also in late 2012. However, it can be seen only by remote and regional communities that have access to the existing television satellite network (Meadows et al., 2007; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009; Meadows, 2010; Featherstone, 2011; D. Featherstone, IRCA general manager, personal communication, 2012).

About AU$16 million each year is distributed by the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF) for Indigenous community radio and television program production around Australia. NITV's annual budget is around AU$15 million. The multifarious roles played by Indigenous radio and television in their communities make this investment by government seem modest, particularly when compared with funding for comparable Indigenous media organisations globally. For example, in Canada in 2012, the Aboriginal People's Television Network had an annual budget of AU$40 million, with an additional AU$9 million distributed for National Aboriginal Broadcasting program production by the Department of Canadian Heritage. In the same year, Maori Television in New Zealand received AU$34 million, with an additional AU $1 million allocated for Maori television programming (Aboriginal People's Television Network, 2012; Maori Television, 2012; Department of Canadian Heritage, 2012).

Although Indigenous broadcasting in Australia remains on the periphery of the Australian mediascape, a study of the sector in 2007 revealed that audiences identify Indigenous media as essential community services which play a central organising role in community life. Indigenous media help maintain social networks and play a strong educative role in communities in supporting languages and cultures, particularly for young people. They offer alternative sources of news and information without the prevalent stereotyping present in mainstream media, and in doing so, help break down prejudices for non-Indigenous audiences. The stations offer a crucial medium for Indigenous music and dance, and arguably are the primary supporters of the vast Indigenous music industry. It is evident that Indigenous radio and television is playing a key role in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia (Meadows et al., 2007; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows, 2009; Meadows, 2010). This extraordinary and diverse contribution to the democratic process continues to pass almost unnoticed by the broader Australian public and its political servants.

The public sphere

Jurgen Habermas's theorisation of the public sphere provides a useful framework for development of the idea of an Indigenous public sphere, centred primarily on media production and process. A central focus of Habermas's idea draws on the shifting role of the mass media as centres of rational-critical discursive activity to commercialised vehicles for advertising and public relations, within the context of the nineteenth-century decline of the liberal public sphere (Habermas, 1974, 1989, 1992). Habermas describes the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" – unrestricted access to the public sphere is a defining characteristic, with the mass media playing a central role in this process (1974: 29). The decline of the *liberal* public sphere was hastened with a shift from the media being a forum for rational-critical debate for private citizens assembled to form 'a public', to a privately owned and controlled institution that is easily manipulated by media owners. For Habermas (1989: 185), this came about as a result of the absence of a barrier between editorial and advertising – a process that continues unabated, extending to ethical collapse in modern mass media systems (Herman and McChesney, 1997; Hamilton, 2004; Davies, 2008; Finkelstein, 2012; Leveson, 2012). Thus, the central role of mass media – particularly broadcasting – as a primary element of public sphere formation has thrown up challenges to Habermas's ideal.

Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas's model – which excludes women, 'plebian' men and all people of colour – nevertheless prompts a rethinking rather than a rejection of his ideas. For Fraser, the important theoretical task is to "render visible the ways in which societal inequality infects formally exclusive existing public spheres and taints discursive interactions with them" (1993: 13). So her reconceived public sphere model theorises it as a space where participants with similar cultural backgrounds *can* engage in discussions about issues and interests important to them, using their own discursive styles – and genres – to formulate their positions on various issues. Such ideas and assumptions can then be shared through a wider public sphere where "members of different more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity" (ibid.: 7). This theorises the existence of multiple public spheres where members of society who are subordinated or ignored – "subaltern counterpublics" – are able to communicate (ibid.: 14).

It is precisely this empowering process that has acted as a catalyst for the rise of community media around the world, and it is nowhere more evident than in Australia, which has become the most researched globally in terms of its community radio and television sector. But while community radio and television offer alternatives and a level of empowerment for media audiences in the broader community, they represent *an essential service* for those on the periphery. And that is the focus of my argument here.

Indigenous public spheres

Indigenous public spheres are not a non-dominant variant of the broader public sphere. Although they develop both within and alongside mainstream society, they

should be seen as discrete formations that exist in a unique context as the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere. While they operate *within* a dominant context, it is their 'Indigenousness' that is the defining characteristic (Avison, 1996; Meadows, 2005). This is evident in audience descriptions of why Indigenous radio and/or television matters. Extending Fraser's (1993) notion of the existence of multiple public spheres, Indigenous public spheres can be seen as providing opportunities for people who are regularly subordinated and ignored by mainstream public sphere processes. This is akin to Grossberg's (1987) notion of empowerment. These spheres enable Indigenous people to deliberate together, to develop their own counter-discourses, and to interpret their own identities and experiences. Albeit speaking about Canada's Native peoples, Valaskakis underlines the importance of Indigenous people controlling their own representations, concluding (1993):

> ... otherness is related to issues of identity and cultural struggle entrenched in representation and appropriation, in how they are represented, and how these representations are appropriated by others in a political process which confines their past as it constructs their future.

Representation is a crucial site of struggle over identity; a dynamic process that functions through dialogue (Langton, 1993; Avison, 1996; Meadows, 2001). And it is the very nature of the dialogue between Indigenous producers and their audiences that offers a unique insight into the creation and maintenance of Indigenous identity. The *absence* of a barrier between producers of Indigenous media and their audiences has been suggested before (Michaels, 1986; Kulchyski, 1989). But without access to significant audience data, such claims have relied primarily on anthropological methods such as participant observation and ethnography. The data from an extensive national audience study of the Indigenous media sector offered new insights into the processes of the Indigenous public sphere (Meadows et al., 2007). One media worker in the remote Indigenous community of Yuendumu described the relationships in producing local media like this (ibid.: 53):

> The audience are the producers and ... we get constant feedback from them as to what they want. And also ... they're prepared to just get up there and do it themselves ... it's a unique situation [and] it's something that the government should treasure.

In locations around Australia, audiences for Indigenous radio and television expressed this sentiment in different ways: a sense of ownership, communication, identification with the grassroots, access and the innate ability by stations to relate to their listeners socially, culturally and linguistically. One of the most persuasive came from an elderly Pitjantjantjara woman during a cultural festival at Umuwa in the central desert. She was determined to have her say about the importance of Indigenous-produced radio and television in her community (ibid.: 61):

> Travelling in any way in the country they can listen to music; they can put a TV there and make everybody happy, make everybody awake and think

> about the land: this is my grandmother's land; this is my *tjamu's* land, this is my *kami's* land, my grandmother's, and grandfather's, uncle's, mother's. The media we started for *Anangu* children. We can't give it to anybody.

For this Indigenous woman, like many others around the country, Indigenous media is *inherent in* local culture: there is no division between media and community. It underlines that the communication network facilitated by Indigenous media is expansive and unique. This is the Indigenous public sphere in action.

Indigenous public spheres are frames of understanding existing on a variety of levels: clan, community/reserve, provincial/territorial, regional, urban, national/international. They are also constituted to an extent by mainstream media through agenda-setting functions and the processes of 'local talk' – the ways in which people 'make sense' of ideas and assumptions concerning Indigenous affairs represented in mainstream media (McCallum, 2007, 2010). Indigenous public spheres are places where Indigenous people find the information and resources they need to deliberate on issues of concern to them. In keeping with Habermas's principle of publicity, they are accessible to all citizens and, ideally, are spaces where the views of participants are judged and authorised, according to traditional, local protocols. For example, the very nature of non-Indigenous journalistic inquiry is often in direct conflict with traditional knowledge-management processes in Indigenous societies making understanding of Indigenous public sphere processes critical for journalists (O'Regan, 1990: 68; Ginsburg, 1991, 1993: 574; Meadows, 1993; Avison, 1996; Meadows, 2005).

Storytelling, art and music – and even silence – are important ways in which Indigenous people make their positions known, as are the ways in which they are presented. An 'ideal' Indigenous public sphere – one which takes account of the inevitable complications inherent in cross-cultural communication – accommodates such varied and culturally specific communicative styles (Meadows, 2005). One unexpected outcome of the national study of the Indigenous media sector was the important role being played by community radio and television in promoting mental health. The promotion of emotional and social well-being is enabled, particularly because of the absence of a barrier between audiences and producers of local radio and television in Indigenous communities – another example of an Indigenous public sphere in action in unexpected ways (Meadows and Foxwell, 2011).

The particular relationship that defines audiences and producers of Indigenous community broadcasting has created a "more engaged and participatory culture" which enhances the communication process at various levels (Deuze, 2006: 271). Indigenous community radio, in particular, has the potential to enhance social cohesion and social gain – arguably the markers of successful social media activity. It suggests, too, that perhaps it is only at the level of the local that such critical social processes are best managed.

Conclusion

The continuing circulation of ideas and assumptions about Indigenous communities – through Indigenous media – contributes to the development of a national Indigenous

public sphere by highlighting common experiences and issues and facilitating dialogue about them. Leakage 'across lines of cultural diversity' into the mainstream public sphere enable ideas to be considered as part of a broader democratic process – theoretically, at least. Indigenous media serve as an important cultural bridge between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, linking these 'parallel universes'. Indigenous-produced radio and television – particularly at the community level – provide sites for public opinion formation; sites where citizens can engage in collective efforts to bring their issues to the dominant public sphere; and sites where Indigenous people can attempt to influence the policies of various governments through the pressure of public opinion. Valaskakis (1993) eloquently articulates this process, facilitated by the very existence of Indigenous public spheres that enable the voices of such 'subaltern counterpublics' to be heard:

> It is through the prism of parallel voices, of competing narratives, expressed in public text – in literature, art, music, ceremony, and media – that we can access the subaltern experience, expand our concepts of inquiry, and approach our points of connectedness.

And surely, any activity that enhances the ability to 'connect' – socially, culturally and politically – is an admirable contribution to the democratic process.

Further reading

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