

Remote Indigenous Media Association (RIMA) Oral History Project

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Abstract

From the early days of remote community radio, in the late 1970s, Australia's remote Indigenous communities, personnel from government bodies and the audio-visual media industries, have come together to embrace satellite technology. While this new technology facilitates much-needed communications into the most remote regions of Australia, it also presents an ongoing challenge to Indigenous communities in their efforts to retain and promote their cultural traditions, languages and methods of storytelling.

The Remote Indigenous Media Association Oral History Project is a project within the National Film and Sound Archive's (NFSA) Oral History Program. In collaboration with the work of the NFSA's Indigenous Collections Branch, the focus of the project is to record the stories and historical voices of the people and pioneers associated with the history of Indigenous media in the remote regions of Australia.

Key to media associations:

CAAMA - Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, Alice Springs, Northern Territory.

WMA - Warlpiri Media Association, Yuendumu, Northern Territory.

EVTV - Ernabella Video Television, Ernabella, South Australia.

PY MEDIA - (previously EVTV), Ernabella, South Australia.

TEABBA - Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasters Association, Darwin, Northern Territory.

NGAANYATJARRA MEDIA, Gibson and Great Victorian Deserts, Western Australia.

PAKAM - Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media Association, Broome, Western Australia.

Papunya, situated 250 kilometres north west of Alice Springs in Central Australia, was a federal government settlement¹ for the Indigenous people of Australia's central western desert region. The settlement was established in 1959 and administered by non-Indigenous government personnel. The aerial



Figure 1, Papunya 1968
Photo courtesy: Christine Guster

photograph (Figure 1) was taken while I was living and working as a nurse there in 1968. At that time, the local Aboriginal population lived in traditional humpy² shelters, and followed their ancient laws, culture, languages, and traditions. Other than visits by the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the weekly mail plane and a supply truck, all of which turned up only when the weather or the condition of dirt roads permitted, desert communities like Papunya received few visits from non-Indigenous people.

Talk of something called a 'satellite'

The idea of satellite technology was introduced to such areas in the late 1970s, albeit in a rather crude form. In an oral history interview conducted by author Dr. Wendy Bell in 2008, Philip Batty,³ a teacher at Papunya, who later went on to become a pioneer of remote Indigenous media in central Australia, made the following observation about a visit to the settlement by government officials in 1978.

I heard about the development of a domestic satellite probably --- In fact it was before I had anything to do with CAAMA [Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association].

I remember when I was at Papunya in about 1978-79, a delegation from the federal government, the Department of Communication I think it was, came out to Papunya on a fact finding tour as they called it, through remote communities in Australia... [they] were asking people about their views on a national satellite and what sort of things they wanted from

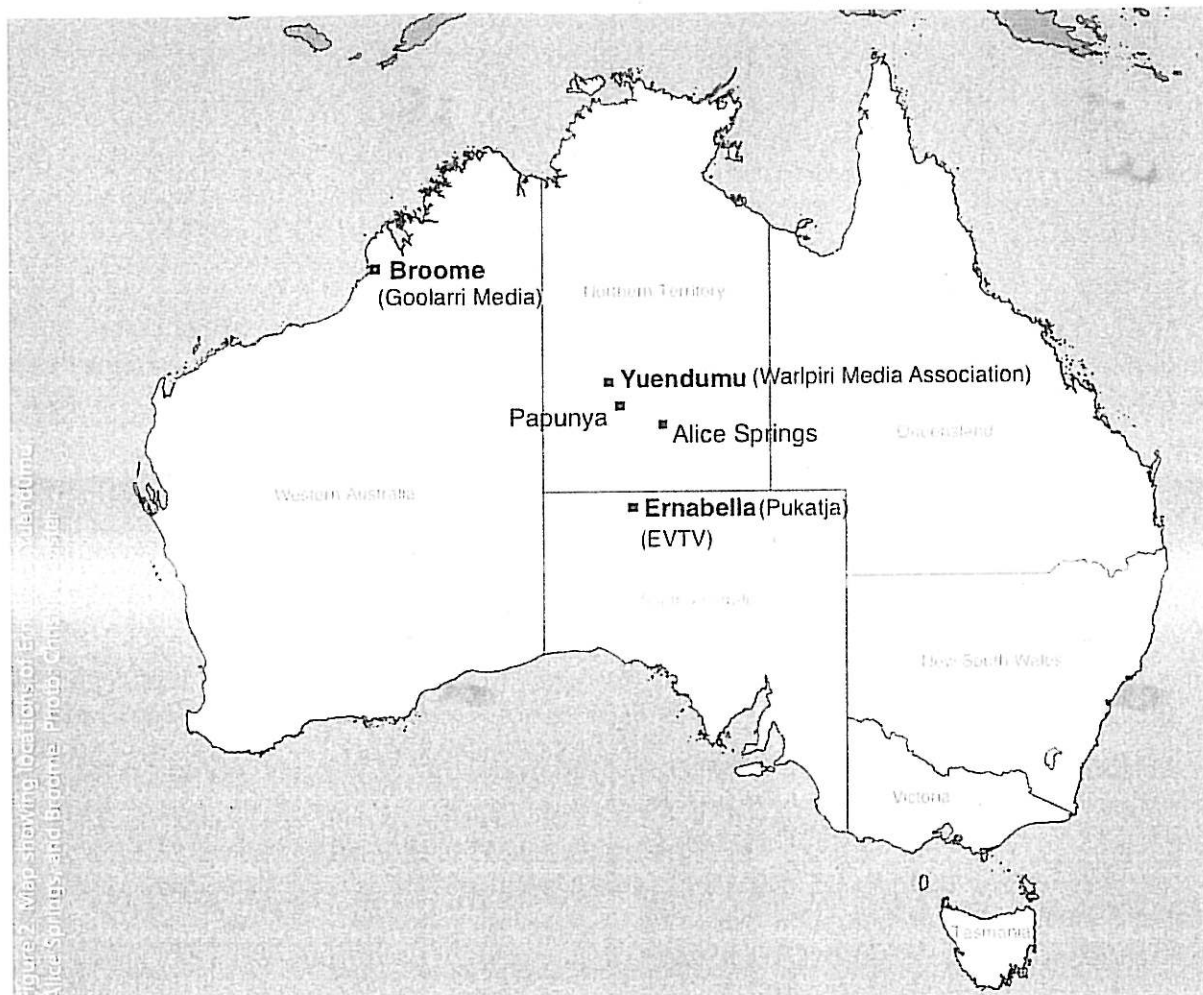


Figure 2. Map showing locations of Yuendumu, Alice Springs, and Broome. Photo: Chris Gifford.

it. And I remember strolling up to this meeting that was being held under a gum tree in Papunya with Aboriginal people sitting around with very little understanding of what was going on. Very little English for a start. And these bureaucrats from Canberra blabbing on with all this technical jargon about a national satellite...I mean most of the white people could barely understand what it was about, let alone the Aboriginal people. I remember thinking then what a complete absurd situation. They were asking Aboriginal people what they wanted out of this satellite service.⁴

For the people living in communities such as Papunya there was a very real fear about the 'coming of the satellite,' as told by Dr. Wendy Bell in her 2008 publication: *A Remote Possibility: The Battle for Imparja*:

The satellite threatened the very isolation that had helped to preserve what remained of traditional language and culture.... There were even fears that the satellite might be a threat to Aboriginal Law with the 'possibility, however remote, that satellite cameras could spy on men's business in the remote desert', watch initiations or zone in on sacred sites.⁵

There was also a major concern in these communities about the sort of western style programming the new satellite technology would bring, such as soap operas, dramas, sitcoms, violent movies and of course

advertising. Such programs would present a way of storytelling very different from that handed down by Indigenous elders throughout the generations. What impact could these new images and storylines have on people in these remote communities?

During 1982 - 83 (six years after Philip Batty's observations at Papunya), the Indigenous communities in Central Australia, namely Ernabella in remote South Australia and Yuendumu in the Northern Territory (see map above), set up their individual television production units using domestic video equipment to record footage of their individual community daily activities and events. The footage, shot mostly in local language by Indigenous school children and adults, was copied onto VHS tapes and stored in cupboards and kept for screening to community residents on the production unit's television monitor.

The Yuendumu Video Unit, led by American anthropologist and researcher Dr. Eric Michaels,⁶ called itself the 'Warlpiri Media Association' (WMA). The Ernabella Video Unit, which became 'EVTV', was pioneered and led by local schoolteachers Rex Guthrie⁷ and Neil Turner.⁸ Rex and Neil worked purely as technical advisers, assisting in helping the community to record and tell its own stories as it wished, as Neil Turner outlines in an interview I

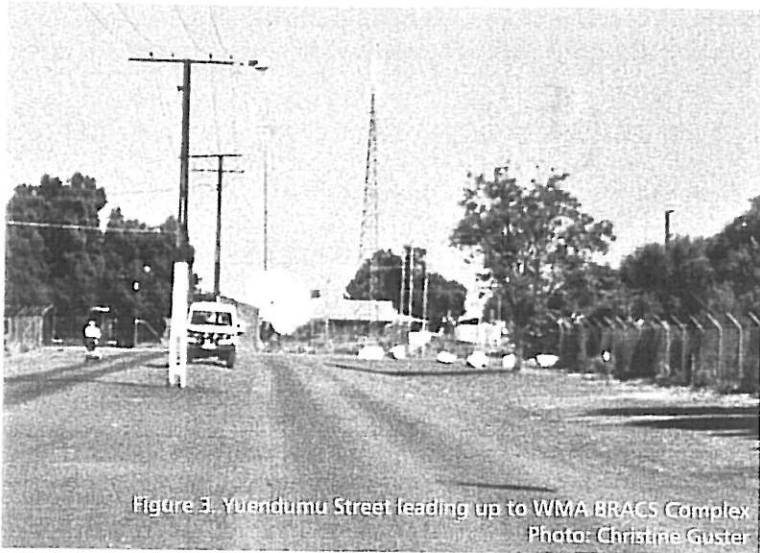


Figure 3. Yuendumu Street leading up to WMA BRACS Complex
Photo: Christine Guster

conducted with him in 2009:

...it wasn't just the video crew who would run the service for the community, but the school, the health, the police, the church, the footballers, everyone would get involved in contributing to the community programming, and the video production crew could go and record things with them if they didn't have their own cameras...⁹

Both Yuendumu and Ernabella video units were carrying out groundbreaking work and it was new and exciting for Indigenous people to see and hear themselves and their stories portrayed for the first time on a television screen. Initially, the EVTV unit planned to use its equipment as a communication and educational tool to assist schoolteachers in the classroom to better communicate with their pupils, and to break down the barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. But the video technology and the programs produced proved to be an entertaining, communication and educational tool for all community residents.

Indigenous elders seek local control

In light of the fears Indigenous elders held about the coming of the satellite technology and the impact it would have on their culture, community leaders from the central desert decided that they would like to follow the lead of, and expand on, the work done by video units at Yuendumu (WMA) and Ernabella (EVTV). They voiced their concerns to the federal government, explaining their desire to take some control over what programs they and their children would watch in order to retain their own identity, traditions, and languages. During 1983-84, as the launch of the satellite drew closer, and as a result of concerns voiced by Indigenous leaders, the federal government appointed a special task force, led by Eric Willmot,¹⁰ to look at the possible effects that satellite television technology and western-

style programming could have on people in these remote communities.

The government's review, and the 1984 *Out of the Silent Land* Report that followed,

led to the development of a scheme that would empower Indigenous people in the communities across the country to produce and broadcast their own individual community television and radio programs. The scheme was named the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Community Scheme, which became known as 'BRACS'.¹¹

The scheme involved placing a BRACS production unit into a community. Each unit contained equipment for the users to produce and transmit, under special class licence, their own semi-professional local video and radio programs to homes within their community. To qualify for a unit the only requirement stipulated by government was that a community must have more than 200 residents and provide a secure and lockable air-conditioned hut to house the unit. In the first roll-out of the equipment in 1987, 74 communities received units. By 1991, this number had increased to 150.

The scheme was not without its problems. The sheer distances between communities meant that non-Indigenous manpower was not always available to train local people in use of the equipment, or to provide technical and general maintenance support.



Figure 4. Cupboard located in WMA BRACS Complex
Photo: Christine Guster



Figure 5. Original Imparja TV Station building, 14 Leichhardt St., Alice Springs
Photo: Christine Guster

Figure 6. ICTV Logo. Reproduced with their permission



Resident training programs were introduced at Batchelor College in Darwin and James Cook University in Queensland for BRACS operators, who were then encouraged to take their skills back to their community and train other community members. This worked well on the whole, but it was (and still is) difficult for government trained tutors to maintain the ongoing support and mentorship when the course participants returned to their communities.

In 1999, while I was working as the NFSA's Television Acquisition Officer in Canberra, a friend contacted me from the WMA at Yuendumu, suggesting I might be interested in what was happening there, as indeed I was. I visited Yuendumu in 2000 and was able to see for myself the BRACS system in action.

Inside the BRACS complex (Figure 3), I came across a cupboard full of VHS tapes available for screening within the community (Figure 4). The contents of the cupboard represented just a small part of the collection WMA had produced. The footage (mostly in local language) included content such as local community news; traditional song and dance ceremonies; school outings; community meetings; bush food and medicine collecting trips by women and children; local music band performances; and craft workshops. Video tapes containing restricted footage were stored separately. Access to them was controlled by community elders.

Commercial programs versus community programs

Running parallel with, and in contrast to, the federal government's 1980s and early 1990s roll-out of the BRACS equipment, was another important local initiative. In late 1983, the Alice Springs independent Indigenous community radio network,

later known as CAAMA, responded to a Department of Communications advertisement in the local Alice Springs newspaper the *Centralian Advocate*. The advertisement called for interested parties to place a submission to the federal government for a Remote Commercial Television Service Licence (RCTS). The service was to be linked directly to the new AUSSAT Satellite to be launched in 1985. According to Philip Batty, the radio station's main interest in the Licence at that time was to 'extend CAAMA's [radio] broadcast range outside the fairly restricted area in Central Australia... the only way to do that was using the satellite'. As Batty pointed out, his interest was 'not so much in the television side, but in possibly using the satellite to distribute CAAMA radio to all these communities throughout the [Northern] Territory'.¹²

Philip Batty and the board of CAAMA soon learned that the Licence bid meant much more than just expanding their radio broadcasting capability. The complex submission process covering commercial television broadcasting was to last just over four years. Their bid was successful and the new Alice Springs Television Network named 'Imparja'¹³ was set up. The new television station located on Leichhardt Terrace overlooking the Todd River (Figure 5) went to air in 1988, three years after the satellite was launched, and ten years after the government's visit to Papunya, where officials had sat down under a gum tree to ask a group of elders what they wanted out of a satellite service.

Under the new licence, Imparja was required to broadcast commercial television programming, and began to select its programs from the free-to-air commercial Seven and Nine networks down south.



Satellite receiving dishes were installed into the remote communities that had BRACS transmission equipment and, virtually overnight, commercial and non-commercial (ABC TV) programs that the Indigenous elders had expressed concerns about a few years earlier became available. A new and different culture arrived via the television screen – that of western style television programs.

A whole new world opened up to the Indigenous people, and life in the remote communities changed forever.

After receiving its RCTS Licence, Imparja made an informal social commitment to include Indigenous content on the network. It is not clear what percentage was finally agreed upon. Apart from the very popular magazine style television series titled *Nganampa Anwernkenhe*¹⁴ produced by CAAMA and broadcast on Imparja, very few other CAAMA produced television programs eventuated, due to a lack of resources.

BRACS programs reach far and wide

In 2000, Imparja's Chief Engineer, Tim Mason,¹⁵ began exploring the possibility of splitting Imparja's allocated satellite space and creating a second and separate narrowcast community satellite channel (Channel 31). In Mason's words, taken from his oral history interview conducted in 2008:

...I always had this vision right from the start that we could squeeze two TV pictures in the space where we had one. By using digital technology we could carry a main Imparja picture and a channel on the side which could become an Indigenous TV [community]

channel...dividing up [satellite] transponder [space] so you can carry more than one TV picture at a time... the benefit to the communities was enormous.¹⁶

By 2004, after a lengthy testing phase as an information channel, the second narrowcast channel was officially up and running and it became known as the Indigenous Community Television Service (ICTV) (Figure 6). Imparja provided the transmission technology for the new channel and the media associations took ownership of the content that went to air.

For the communities, this new channel meant that their locally made programs (radio and television) could be broadcast across the country to all of the 150 BRACS communities on a regular basis. For Imparja, this meant that the network could at last meet its original social obligations to broadcast Indigenous content, which it had been doing very little of since its inception in 1988.

With the introduction of ICTV, life became even busier for staff at Imparja - as Tim Mason put it, 'like Topsy, it just grewed'. There were five main remote media associations, namely PY Media, WMA, CAAMA, TEABBA and NGAANYATJARRA MEDIA each representing BRACS communities in their respective regions. The associations provided local radio and television programs to Imparja for broadcast via the new second narrowcast channel. For example, PY Media¹⁷ (previously EVTV) took on the role of collecting and collating programs from BRACS communities across the APY Lands of South Australia's central desert regions.

Imparja accepted all programs offered and broadcast them unedited, irrespective of the level of technical quality or video format supplied. The programs were all considered as local community content to be shared.

Media associations from as far afield as Broome in Western Australia and later Queensland and Torres Strait also sent programs to Imparja for broadcast on ICTV. In addition to sending copies of video productions, Goolarri Media Association in Broome produced and contributed radio programs (Figure 7) via PAKAM to outlying communities in the Kimberley region (Figure 8), as explained by Robert Lee,¹⁸ Manager of Goolarri Media, in an interview conducted in 2009:

They send a signal... from here via telephone all the way to Alice Springs ... through Alice through Imparja ... to satellite [to] towns such as Fitzroy [Crossing], Halls Creek sometimes Kununurra, then all the communities: Beagle Bay, Lombadina, Djarindjin, Looma right through...¹⁹

A new era begins for Indigenous media

Although running on a limited budget for most the time the ICTV channel was, from its inception, working well for both Imparja and the communities. However, in 2006, things changed dramatically for ICTV. The federal government announced that the service was to be closed down and replaced by a National Indigenous Television Service (NITV). As described by Dr. Wendy Bell:

the 'caterpillar' suddenly had a new and exciting opportunity to become the 'butterfly' ... In 2006 Imparja made a deal to play a major role in the [federal government] planned National Indigenous Television (NITV) service from mid-2007. NITV was designed to build upon the existing Indigenous Community TV initiative transmitted on Imparja's second satellite channel 31 narrowcasting service (Channel 31) using the Imparja uplink facility in Alice Springs.²⁰

On Friday 13 July 2007, the ICTV service ceased to be. It was replaced by the new NITV service being broadcast from Imparja and controlled by a board established and administered in Sydney. Program content would be selected by a committee in Sydney, and the ICTV community content in its raw form would need to go through a program selection process before being accepted for broadcast on the new service.

Neil Turner, in his interview, referred to the last day ICTV was broadcast as 'Black Friday'. He went on to explain:

...ICTV kept broadcasting right up to the switch over date. And yes, there has been a lot of concern expressed, especially by language speaking groups and

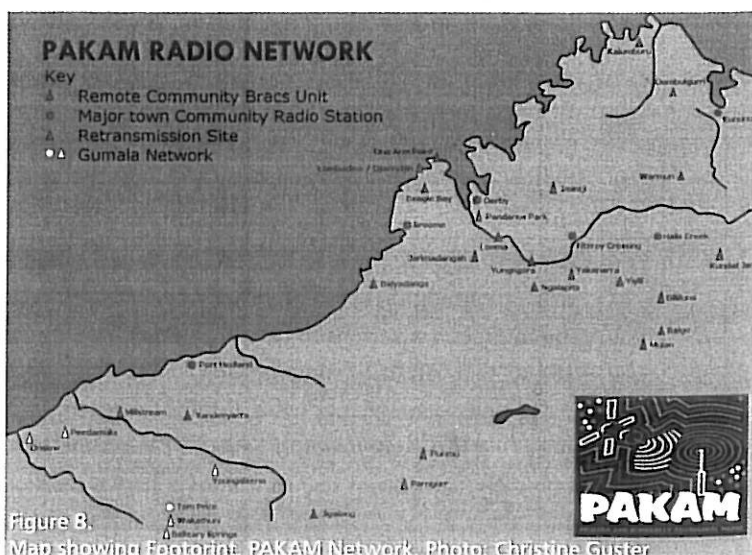
Central Australian Ngaanyatjarra Media, and so on, who saw a very different style of television [on NITV], you know. Some of them can quote, 'These are all sad stories'. You know, town people sure, there are issues, sure, Stolen Generation, and other sorts of issues, but it wasn't at all the joyful community celebratory style of ICTV... just the fact that there was no language suddenly, from 70 to 80 per cent and Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara people and Warlpiri people, and seeing people speaking language on their television, then suddenly total cut-off...²¹

From Imparja's point of view, the change was a positive one for the future of Indigenous television, and for future program production material created in the communities. Tim Mason commented that 'it was sad to lose contact with the community groups', and acknowledged that 'without the hard work of the Indigenous media associations there would never have been an ICTV or an NITV'. In his opinion, the move to NITV:

could be regarded as a good thing or a bad thing, it was bad in that it took over some existing infrastructure and removed the outlet for those communities' TV services, but it legitimised and gave authority to what I would call a professional broadcast organisation to operate a fully professional national Indigenous television channel... a professional broadcasting system which would schedule material at the right time, would take on the rights management, would commission new material, would run the service as a full-time professional service... and in my discussions with community groups they are now being commissioned to produce programming for the national Indigenous service ...²²

Mason went on to add:

ICTV probably had reached the limit of its capability as an Indigenous cooperative, unfunded, running by the seat of its pants, and in all honesty NITV was the next logical step on from the ICTV operation...



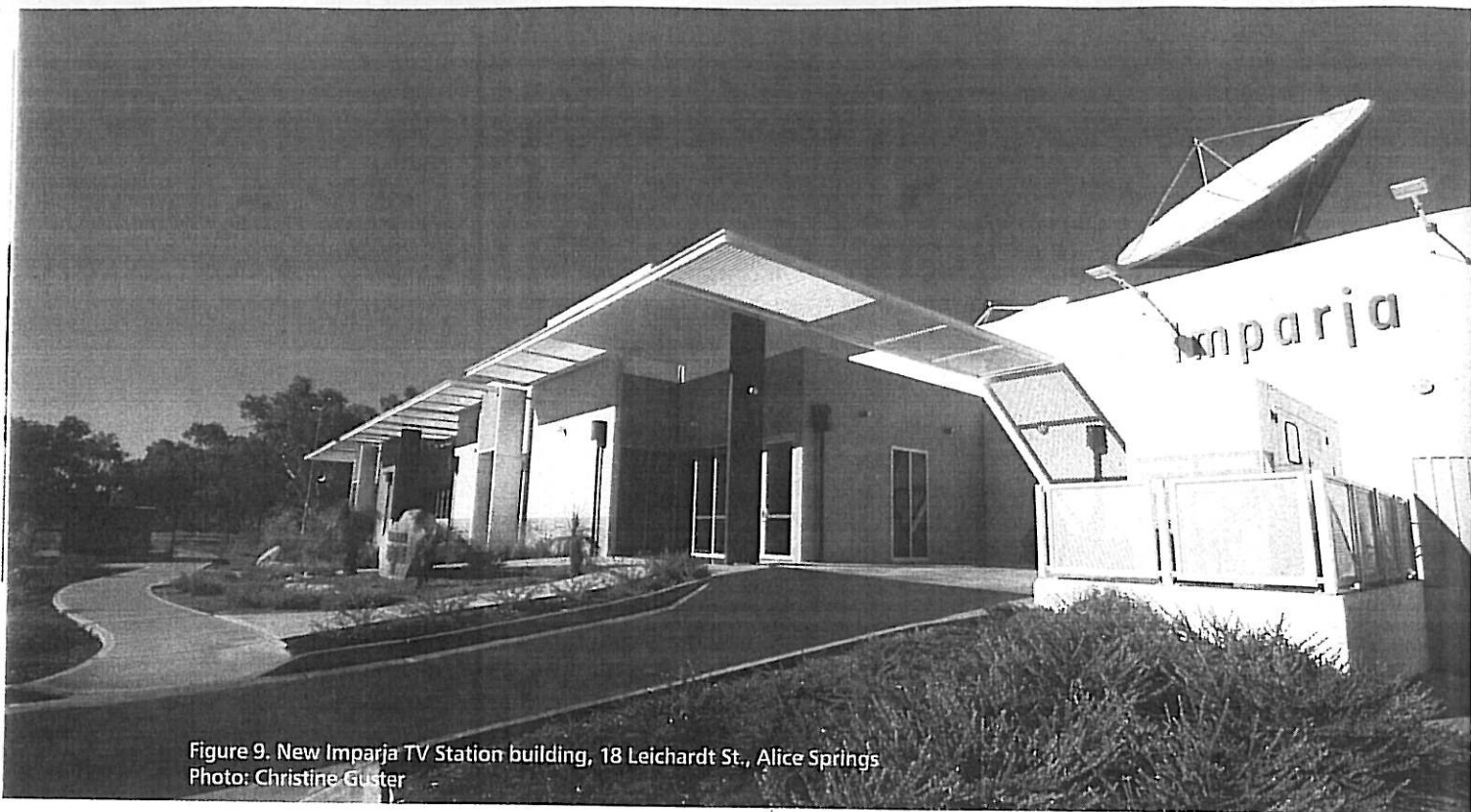


Figure 9. New Imparja TV Station building, 18 Leichardt St., Alice Springs
Photo: Christine Guster

Conclusion

Remote Indigenous Media has come a long way since the board of CAAMA responded to the advertisement in the *Centralian Advocate* in late 1983, twenty-six years prior to the launch of NITV.

In 2008, in preparation for the present Federal Government's conversion to digital technology in 2013, the Imparja network moved down the road to a new, purpose-built, more efficient facility (Figure 9) that could meet the demands associated with advanced technological changes. According to Tim Mason in his 2008 interview, 'the network [Imparja] has become the largest single station market in the world, with one signal across six states and territories and five different time zones'.

But what of the grass roots Indigenous community programs? Where and how will they be broadcast in the future? There are many video-tapes still housed by some of the communities that may not meet the 'professional standard' of production required by NITV. What will happen to these locally produced programs now that commercial and National Indigenous media television networks have the upper hand?

At the time of writing, ICTV staff are experimenting with streaming their television and radio material on the internet via a website titled *Indigitube*²³ (Figure 10) so that BRACS community viewers can watch community footage and listen to radio programs online. But, for all contributors to the ICTV channel, this is merely a stop-gap measure until a better solution can be found for ICTV material. The aim is to regain

what was lost, and strive to again have their own dedicated satellite television channel to broadcast their community productions Australia-wide.

It will be interesting to see what the future holds for Indigenous community television material as the Federal Government's National Broadband Network²⁴ rolls out, with the possibility of more television channels becoming available. The ongoing challenge will increasingly be one of maintaining a balance between community and commercial needs, especially when the lure of new media draws children away from traditional face-to-face models of community storytelling.

There is, however, an exciting potential for both radio and television media to complement traditional ways of storytelling, and introduce new ways of passing on, and retaining community traditions and languages in program formats that meet the needs of their Indigenous audiences.

The history of the introduction and the development of western media into the remote regions of Australia is an important one to tell. The NFSA's RIMA Oral History Project has just begun to focus on recording and preserving the stories of the work carried out by Indigenous media associations in Alice Springs, the Central Desert and Broome in North West Australia. The oral history interviews quoted throughout this paper help in the telling of this story, but they reflect only a few of the many more voices and experiences belonging to the people who contributed to, or have taken part in creating, this very important period in our media history.

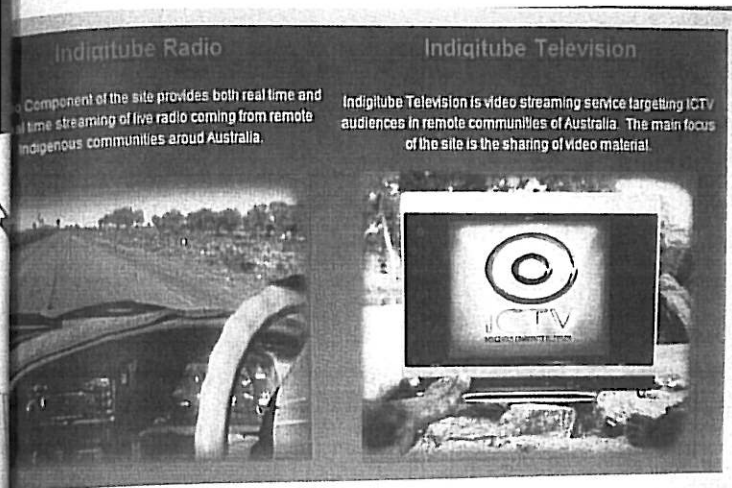


Figure 10. Indigitube Website page

Note

This paper is based on a presentation given by Christine Guster at the Oral History Association of Australia 16th National Conference, *Islands of Memory: Navigating Personal and Public History*, held on 17-20th September 2009 in Launceston, Tasmania.

For more details about this project please contact the Oral History Program at the National Film and Sound Archive on 02 6248 2022 or visit our website: www.nfsa.gov.au

Endnotes

¹ The Federal and Northern Territory governments established Papunya settlement in 1959, as a place for Aboriginal people who had moved in from the desert. For the vast majority of the people who arrived at Papunya it was their first contact with non-Indigenous Australians. See: www.nma.gov.au/collections-papunya.

² A humpy is a small, temporary shelter made from bark and tree branches, with a standing tree usually used as the main support. The shelter was traditionally used by Indigenous Australians. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpy>

³ Philip Batty went on to become a co-founder and Deputy Director of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), which was established in Alice Springs in 1980, with the radio network broadcasting as 8 KIN FM. Batty is currently a Senior Curator with the Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

⁴ Philip Batty, interviewed by Wendy Bell, 10 December 2008 - 19 February 2009. Audio and Transcription held by National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). Title No: 774192, p. 43 of transcription.

⁵ Dr. Wendy Bell, *A Remote Possibility: The Battle for Imparja Television*, IAD Press, Alice Springs. Northern Territory, 2008, pp. 41, 48.

⁶ Eric Michaels was assigned to Yuendumu as part of a three-year anthropological research project for the then Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, to research the 'impact and implications of the introduction of television on remote Aboriginal communities'. See: <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/3.2/Ruby.html>

⁷ From 1980 to 1985, Rex Guthrie lived and worked at the Aboriginal Community of Ernabella during which time he created the innovative Community Project called EVTV - 'Ernabella Video Television' (now PY Media).

⁸ Neil Turner, Manager, PAKAM Radio Network, Broome and previously Manager, (EVTV) Television Unit, Ernabella. S.A. Turner took over managing the EVTV Unit when Rex Guthrie left in 1986 to return to Adelaide, S.A.

⁹ Neil Turner, interviewed by author, 3 August 2009 - 7 August 2009. Audio and transcription held by NFSA. Title No: 791707, p. 68 of transcription.

¹⁰ Dr. Wendy Bell, *A Remote Possibility: The Battle for Imparja Television*, p. 100.

¹¹ Department of Aboriginal Affairs, *Out of the Silent Land*, Report of the Task Force on Aboriginal and Islander Broadcasting and Communications, AGPS, Canberra, August 1984.

¹² Philip Batty, interviewed by Wendy Bell, NFSA Title No: 774192, p. 44 of transcript.

¹³ Imparja (pronounced IM-PAR-JA) is the anglicized spelling and pronunciation of the word Impatye, meaning tracks or footprints in the Arrrente language. See <http://www.imparja.com-AboutUs>.

¹⁴ 'The primary aim of Nganampa Anwerkenhe is the maintenance of Aboriginal languages and culture...' See: <http://caama.com.au/category/productions>.

¹⁵ Tim Mason was appointed Chief Engineer at Imparja in 1997 to manage digital satellite conversion; Studio upgrade; amalgamation of licence area with Queensland; and the design of a new digital studio facility. Creating a second narrowcast satellite channel (Ch.31) was not part of his official brief.

¹⁶ Tim Mason, interviewed by author, 17 December 2008. Audio held by NFSA. Title No: 770543.

¹⁷ In 1987 members of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands decided that it was necessary to develop the same services provided by EVTV in all communities across the APY Lands. PY Media was incorporated as the regional body to assist communities to develop their own community media centres. In the mid 1990s PY Media moved out of Ernabella to Umuwa to set up a regional office that enabled fair representation for all communities on the APY Lands. See: <http://www.waru.org/organisations/pymedia/admin.php>

¹⁸ Robert Lee began his career with Goolarri Media in 1992. He has held the positions of Broadcast Journalist, Radio Station Manager, Operations Manager and Producer and Presenter of various radio and television programs for Goolarri Media Enterprises.

¹⁹ Robert Lee, interviewed by author, 6 August 2009. Audio held by National Film and Sound Archive. Title No: 791941.

²⁰ Dr. Wendy Bell, *A Remote Possibility: The Battle for Imparja Television*, p. 328.

²¹ Neil Turner, interviewed by author, NFSA Title No: 791707, p. 263 of transcript.

²² Tim Mason, interviewed by author, NFSA Title No: 770543.

²³ See: <http://www.indigitube.com.au>

²⁴ http://www.dbcde.gov.au/broadband/national_broadband_network