

The Circus comes to Yuendumu, Again

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Yuendumu has been a favoured destination for researchers, film makers and other media groups since the 1931 SA Museum expedition to Cockatoo Creek, approximately 40 kms NW, and 15 years prior to the community's establishment as a ration depot. The reasons for this history are multiple and complex. Relatively speaking, being 300 kms from Alice Springs, Yuendumu is one of the more easily accessed Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. It also has the largest population, and accordingly, is a favoured destination on politicians' itineraries, and for footage to cover stories on the 'Third World conditions' which Australia's indigenous peoples continue to live in today. At Christmas time, when slow down of business means news of substance is often hard to find, it is not unusual for Alice Springs ABC television to ring local organisations and ask 'what's happening', and if there are 'any stories', for them to come and shoot.

In 1984, the Warlpiri Media Association (WMA) was formed at Yuendumu. WMA attracted much interest on a national and international level for its establishment of a pirate television station prior to the Federal government's launch of AUSSAT, which would beam national mass media into the 'outback' for the first time. But WMA was not just a television station. Under the active encouragement of researcher Eric Michaels¹ and Adult Educator Peter Toyne, WMA became a place for the ongoing negotiation of a wide range of issues relating to the electronic media. A number of negative incidents involving ABC and other 'outside crews' lead to the development of a comprehensive and legally binding 'Agreement to Film', which all film makers and media groups must sign prior to arriving to shoot. Accompanying this Agreement is a well formulated briefing and set of rules which crews must abide by, designed to protect the privacy of community members and more generally to give the community some control over the kinds of representations constructed and circulated to wider Australia. These rules include the need for a local liaison to accompany the crew at all times, that no Warlpiri person can be filmed without their permission, that copies of all footage shot must be returned to the community for archival purposes, and that once edited to broadcast format, a copy of the program must be sent to WMA, prior to it going to air, to be vetted by relevant people. In the event that the program contains material of a culturally offensive nature (secret/sacred material in particular), WMA reserves the right to have that material edited out prior to it being broadcast.

While on paper appearing comprehensive enough to ensure some degree of local control over the kinds of representation Yuendumu and its people are subject to by the recording

¹ See Michaels (1994) *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons* Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards

practices of outsiders, the practical policing of these rules is another matter all together. A number of incidents have seen WMA regulations transgressed and subsequently tightened. No one can come onto Aboriginal land without the relevant permits, leaving scope for local people to evaluate every request and make a decision based on what they feel might be the value of any particular project. Not every crew is given access. However, large numbers are, and the process by which this happens and the difficulty of making sure the period of filming is managed properly according to WMA rules, is what I want to explore in this paper. I will do so through examining the most recent 'media event' at Yuendumu, the arrival of Globe TV (a subsidiary of CNN), to make a seven minute piece on the community's videoconferencing facility—Tanami Network—for a program taking a 'human interest' look at technological developments.

Globe are but the latest media group to come to Yuendumu to produce a story on the community's active 13 year history of engagement with new technologies. Eric Michaels noted and Tim Rowse² explored in greater depth the sense in which both research and media activity have become institutionalised in the community. In the past twelve months alone, there have been seven groups come to shoot stories about Tanami Network, including one extensive event via video conference to a reporter from *Forbes* Magazine in the United States. Recently CAAMA were at Yuendumu to shoot footage for their Aboriginal language program *Nganampa Anwernekenhe*; footage which will be used by Tanami Network in the production of a CD-Rom being made, as well as by Warlukurlangu Artists of Yuendumu for their own promotional video. Beyond the daily contact with Land Council anthropologists in relation to Land Claims, mining exploration, and related land rights/management issues, there have been six researchers through during the same period (two of us are living in the community), as well as visits from four others who have done research here in the past. A Sydney based film crew were through in the last weeks to make a documentary film, and the recent Sports Weekend carnival was 'shot' by four different media outlets. The day after Sports Weekend a reporter from a Melbourne based newspaper turned up to do a story on Tanami Network without having sought permission and was asked to leave. Later the same day a phone call came through from an American academic who sought and gained permission to come and see for himself what Tanami Network was doing. In another month, a Darwin based researcher will be arriving to film activity around Tanami Network and Warlpiri Media as part of the development of a course on indigenous media for the NT University. A Web site on the internet gives a listing of 229 linguistic texts, 171 other writings and 36 films made about the Warlpiri since 1931.

The Globe Event

Globe TV staff discovered Tanami Network while surfing the internet, in the form of an article by Peter Toyne, adviser to the network and instrumental in its establishment. Globe contacted Toyne, who contacted Tanami staff, recommending that with an

² see Rowse (1990) 'Enlisting the Warlpiri' in *Continuum* vol.3 no.2

audience of 170 million people across Europe, Asia and America, it was an opportunity too good to miss. Globe liaised with Tanami staff, receiving background information, negotiating what they wanted for the story, what was logistically possible, the length of stay. After some initial discussion between the Globe producer and Tanami staff, the WMA Agreement was negotiated by the President of the media association, who had understandable concerns about the fact that the footage would be shot in an American configuration, making it impossible for people at Yuendumu to watch the edited story, let alone vet the program before it going to air. Journalist's codes of practice also prevent 'subjects' from having a say in relation to the final form of a news program, the argument being that this would compromise their journalistic integrity.

The Producer, camera and sound men arrived on a Wednesday evening. After having a quick look around and discussing the next day's schedule, they turned around and drove back to the licensed Roadhouse for the night (100 kms back in the direction they'd come from).

They arrived early the next day and whisked Toyne away to do an interview. Tanami Network directors (from four communities) were set to meet for the following two days, and another hectic week was almost guaranteed. Due to the scheduled directors meeting and the fact that other appropriate people were absent from the community, there was a problem with finding an experienced liaison to accompany the crew. A young man who had not done the job before was charged with the task. He chaperoned the crew around the community to get their 'context shots' while Tanami staff and Directors attempted to start the Board meeting. Directors from Kintore, some 500 kms West of Yuendumu had voiced their preference for videoconferencing into the meeting rather than being flown across, but at the last minute it became clear that the link would not work, and that with Lajamanu Directors also being absent due to other meetings, the organisation faced a meeting without quorum. Recent events had included a funding crisis brought on by the change of Federal government that looked for a time like it would send Tanami to the wall. Some incredibly hard lobbying had brought about an eleventh hour injection of funds through ATSIC, and this meeting was to be an important reassessment of the organisation's operations and future direction.

The meeting went on regardless of numbers, starting off with a video conference to a doctor from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Adelaide to brief health workers and Directors on the progress of a tele-medicine program that Tanami and QEH were developing. Globe filmed this meeting. They then followed the health workers back to the clinic to get some footage of the clinic in action. However, moments before, there had been a stabbing and the film crew turned up at the same time as the victim was brought in followed by a stream of concerned family and onlookers. Globe were asked to leave and they did. However, their untimely arrival at the clinic upset a number of people and the WMA President briefed the crew yet again on the importance of staying out of areas which were not their business and respecting people's privacy. The Director's meeting

went on in fits and starts, with time lost in trying and finally succeeding in getting another video conference link up to Alice Springs where a consultant to the project was to brief staff from. Again, Globe filmed segments of our meeting; and again, drove the hundred kilometres back to the Roadhouse for the night, again, and we went home.

The next morning, the camera man was spotted shooting footage of nearby humpy camps—a definite transgression of community wishes—which he had already been told. Another briefing was held with the WMA President, who again stressed the basic rules. Globe were keen to include Tanami's CD-Rom project in the story, and we had organised for some of the traditional owners associated with the project and the painting of the canvas which is central to it, to tell the *jukurrpa* stories depicted in the canvas to Globe. Two hours of driving around, negotiating with traditional owners and the Artists association finally brought all the necessary players together. Lapel microphones were fitted, hats were tilted to give the right angle of vision, the canvas which had been unrolled and secured from the gusty wind prior to the crew's arrival was rolled up again and 'revealed' for the camera on the Producer's request (contrary to real work practices only Warlpiri people could be shown to do the revealing). Then Japaljarri, a senior male traditional owner for the country and *jukurrpa* to which the canvas relates, told the stories depicted there, in Warlpiri. At the end of this he remarked that the canvas was actually around the wrong way (not oriented properly to country). The Producer overheard this, and requested that it be turned around, that they film it being turned around, and tell the story again. Japaljarri and the other traditional owners patiently and generously obliged.

Three senior women and myself then returned to the Tanami office so that the crew could shoot footage of us viewing some of the archival film footage planned to be used in the multimedia project. However, the crew had been present the day before when people were watching a different video of a significant Warlpiri ceremony, *Jardiwarnpa*. The Producer thought that, although this footage had nothing to do with the content of the CD-Rom, it would be more spectacular, and asked if the women could watch some of this instead. It was explained that they had come up here because they were keen to watch the earlier footage and that we were reluctant to reduce the day's proceedings to a totally scripted and decontextualised media event. The women watched the footage they had come to see, and the crew filmed our discussion and reactions as we did. The Producer then found the part of the other film she wanted vision of, and filmed that being played. The idea being that the women's reactions to the other film could be spliced with and played over the top of the more spectacular *Jardiwarnpa* footage.

The old women were taken back to their respective camps. There was now only one event left to orchestrate so that Globe would have the 'vision' they wanted—a family meeting between communities via video conference. It was by now about half past three on a Friday afternoon. There were not many people around, the football team and supporters having left for a weekend of football in Alice Springs. The people who would

normally help to stage such an event had had enough of Globe TV and were nowhere to be found.

In the midst of all of this, one Japanangka came in. He had been one of the first to work at Warlpiri Media and played an important role in developing the Agreement to Film and associated rules governing media activity at Yuendumu, came in. Significantly, this man had also officially liaised with the ABC crew that had come through two years ago and caused havoc as a result of deliberately running off to film a different story to the one they had received permission to come to shoot. What was broadcast on national television directly contributed to some serious inter-family fighting that was in the process of being resolved. As a result of this episode, ABC was banned from Yuendumu for twelve months.

What transpired in our conversation was that Globe had been off on their own the previous evening, without liaison, and had filmed Japanangka, without asking his permission, while he was moving around in his yard. They could not have picked a worse person to focus their unauthorised camera lens on. For the next forty-five minutes a discussion took place between Japanangka, the Producer, camera man and myself. The WMA chairman had left for Alice Springs by this time and no other senior Warlpiri people were around. There were a number of striking things about the dialogue that took place. One was the extent to which the film crew underestimated the complex understanding that this man had of the rhetoric and practices of media groups. The Producer offered an apology and to edit out the footage of the man. Japanangka's response was 'Your words are nothing', and explained that similar promises had been made and broken in the past. Every time any of the crew said anything they got themselves into even hotter water. The Producer seemed to be asking for sympathy when she exclaimed that there was so much money involved and so little time to shoot the story. Japanangka laughed, and said he understood the 'time is money' concept, and that people's privacy was not a significant consideration for the media. The crew were not really interested in talking to him anyway, clearly did not consider this episode threatening or even worth taking seriously, and were much more concerned that they still lacked 'vision' of a family meeting via video conference.

Globe finally got their 'family' video conference through a last minute round up of any kids we could find outside the Tanami office, who 'met' with children who had been hanging around the Kintore council building when the link went up. The crew were amazed and left in a flourish of excitement, remarking on the ten tapes of footage they had captured, and the incredible privilege it had been to visit Yuendumu.

In the debriefing process that often takes place after such events, the question which begs to be asked is: What benefits are derived from such events, the products which result, and their broadcast, by people living at Yuendumu?

Many *Yapa*—Warlpiri people—take pride in the fact that Yuendumu and the social/cultural practices which are part of daily life for its residents—acrylic painting, videoconferencing, the activities of WMA—are known about throughout the world. A number of Yuendumu’s elders are also world renowned artists, who have travelled extensively and whose canvases command high prices. They participate in the production of books, catalogues, documentary films and video conferences to explain the cultural significance of their practices to national and international audiences. The same people are immensely generous with their time and knowledge with potential art buyers, media groups and researchers who visit the community. Many *Yapa* explicitly state that they want *Kardiya* (whitefellas) to know about Warlpiri culture, and that this is in fact an integral part of considering developments such as Tanami Network, the production of canvases, CD-Rom’s and the like.

Kardiya don’t really know what Yapa are on about. They don’t know what’s going on outside of Sydney or Melbourne. We like to let them know. (Robin Japanangka Granites)

Yet many Warlpiri also stress that only *positive* representations should be allowed to circulate in the public realm. Others have remarked to me the importance of not letting outsiders ‘go too deep’ into cultural and familial areas. When they do, inevitably there is trouble. However, the question of refusing outside parties access to represent activity at Yuendumu altogether, has not really arisen as a desirable or viable option. Even, Japanangka, who has been considerably stung by a number of media events at Yuendumu, remarked to me after the interchange with the Globe crew, that he would like to go back and work for WMA again with ‘outside crews’. This is not to say that the possibility of stopping media access to the community does not get articulated, it does, and on a relatively regular basis as part of the analysis of incidents such as that described above, and in response to the production and publication of what locally are perceived as negative representations. An article by a Melbourne academic published in a national newspaper after he visited Yuendumu Sports Weekend in 1995³, detailing his horrified reaction to the community environment—strewn with rubbish, mangy dogs and ‘unhygienic’—sparked a widespread community uproar which carried with it a threat to revoke the current open invitation to non-Aboriginal people and media groups to attend the annual sports carnival.

Such incidents are telling on a number of levels. They emphasise that the old style practices of researchers and media groups are no longer viable (if they ever were), and that the global flow of media almost guarantees that writings and other representational forms about the Warlpiri find their way back to their ‘subjects’, who not only can read, but critically evaluate and respond through the same channels as non-Warlpiri writers and media personnel. The internet is further extending this capacity to access the final

³ see John Carroll ‘Visiting Yuendumu: A personal memoir of an Aboriginal community’ in *Quadrant* October 1995.

product. Numerous requests to receive a copy of the article published in *Forbes* Magazine fell on deaf ears. Recently somebody at Tanami Network came across it while surfing the net. No permission had been sought in relation to placing this article online.

People go through libraries and reading books rather than really being with Yapa, getting the information from ourselves. We get these groups coming out, getting some shots and thinking they know everything. Even when I'm talking, I'm missing out important issues. I talk for my own opinions, not everyone else's. (Robin Japanangka Granites)

Surely this development—that is, the very sophisticated understanding that *Yapa* have of both the way in which the media operate and more generally the process of recording and publishing/broadcasting Warlpiri cultural knowledge—in itself opens up significant new possibilities for real dialogue if not collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous cultural brokers and commentators on the negotiation of such issues.

Eric Michaels⁴ wrote about the prospect of local control mechanisms protecting and providing for a 'cultural future' in which *Yapa* would negotiate the extent to which they wished to engage in the global society through 'inventing' their own media practices. Is it just that these mechanisms are not policed as carefully as they could be, or is the whole issue of local control somewhat flawed in the context of globalisation and the operation of the media? Certainly many things slip through the cracks of the most sophisticated and carefully policed procedures relating to exchange of knowledge between *Kardiya* and *Yapa*. A level of unease accompanies the send off given to every media crew and writer at the end of their stay; a suspicion of the unseeable contents of their video tapes, notebooks and heads. What might come to be constructed from materials taken, where might that material end up, what ramifications might come to pass as a result?

The development of indigenous media associations across remote Australia has been seen as contributing to a tipping of the scales in favour of indigenous representation of indigenous affairs, both for local consumption and to present to the outside world. Dubbed as a way to 'fight fire with fire', commentators have argued that through their own media activity, groups such as the Warlpiri can themselves have some control over the way in which they are represented in the public realm. Moreover, this development is part of a much more comprehensive political process which has irrevocably shifted the relationship between those traditionally represented and those who represent. Who can speak for whom and about what is now a highly contested area both in political and academic arenas.

However, the desire of outsiders to 'know' Yuendumu and the Warlpiri, greatly outweighs the desire and logistical abilities of *Yapa* to make Yuendumu knowable for

⁴ Michaels (1987) *For A Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu*. Art and Criticism Monograph Series, vol.3. Art & Text, Melbourne.

them. There are too many higher priorities to be met on a local level — meeting family obligations, intra-community politics, struggles to make local practices viable, getting on with the job. So Warlpiri from Yuendumu will continue to give access to cultural commentators from ‘outside’. They will do so out of pride, generosity, out of a desire to be known and thus ‘exist’ in the wider society, and in hope that a greater understanding of *Yapa* aspirations may be communicated as a result. They will do so at the same time as knowing and attempting to minimise the risks involved. Moreover, *Yapa* will continue to participate in these processes because they know that any form of self determination necessarily entails knowing how to play the game.

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