# ABOVE AND BEYOND BROADCASTING

A Study of first nations media and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# Contents

*"Yeah, the most information that I remember is the weekly update with COVID-19 ...[PAW] played an important role in addressing the problem through language, through Walpiri and it was a good tool to use."*

PAW Media listener.

# Introduction

The expanding Covid-19 pandemic continues to threaten the safety of communities across Australia, including First Nations communities in rural, remote and suburban areas. From the very early stages of the pandemic response, First Nations media outlets have risen to the challenge of supporting and communicating with Indigenous people and broader audiences by providing targeted, relevant and reliable information and by fostering connections with individuals and between groups. The First Nations media sector proved to be a trusted source of information by tailoring messages to suit its audiences and by correcting emerging misinformation. It recognised and continues to address mental health issues associated with the pandemic by maintaining its focus on the welfare of audiences. It has overcome obstacles and innovated with new forms of programming specifically designed to cater for community needs. First Nations media organisations also demonstrated the important role they play in fostering identity and keeping communities strong and by often going above and beyond broadcasting and communicating through media channels. The sector sees itself as a central influence in the lives of communities, which means it has tried to be present for audience members, not only on air and through media channels, but physically on the street or over the phone or at community events. Its role was, and remains, to help communities survive the pandemic and emerge strong and resilient.  However, the evolving crisis has also highlighted that First Nations media has ongoing challenges with resources, staffing and training and in order to continue to meet the needs of the diverse audiences it serves, these challenges need to be addressed. First Nations media organisations have adapted their crisis response to the pandemic to focus on vaccination information and managing information flow about the evolving directives for travel and lockdowns on an ongoing basis. Through case study examples, this study has generated understanding about how First Nations media organisations operated during the early days of Australia's COVID-19 pandemic. It has identified key lessons that can be learned from that experience, both for the future benefit of media organisations and for those First Nations communities continuing to struggle with the impact of Australia's most urgent public health challenge in nearly a century.

# Executive Summary of findings

- First Nations media is an essential service for the communities it serves, and especially so in times of crisis.

- First Nations media plays an important role in tailoring and localising messaging in culturally appropriate ways for its audiences.

- First Nations media cannot be defined as simply broadcasting from a central hub to disparate audiences as each outlet is distinct and fosters intimate relationships with its audiences.

- First Nations media outlets are primarily focussed on the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

- By focussing on the welfare of audiences, First Nations Media plays a vital role in keeping individuals safe and communities strong.

- First Nations media would benefit from greater recognition of the role it plays to support Indigenous communities.

- First Nations broadcasters are best placed to speak with communities due to their close connections and cultural understanding.

- First Nations media organisations need committed funding in order to keep producing tailored messaging for the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

- State and federal government Indigenous health roundtables and advisory groups could benefit from providing opportunities for First Nations media representatives to share their knowledge.

## Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact communities in very different ways. To assess responses in different environments, the research team sought case study examples from urban, regional and remote areas in order to compare and contrast actions and community engagement in varying environments responding to different pandemic-related risks.

Through supporting its membership of over 40 media organisations through the pandemic response, First Nations Media Australia assisted each organisation to address the unique needs of its community. While some themes emerged, there has been considerable difference in the number of cases in different regions, State and Territory government responses, restrictions to biosecurity areas impacting remote communities differently to regional cities, even within the same jurisdiction. Bespoke and culturally specific media services were, and remain, essential in distributing emergency information to communities in a manner that connects with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences.

At the time this study was conducted (2020), media organisations were still primarily focused on content production to keep up-to-date with emerging issues. The research team did not have the resources to conduct large-scale surveys required for national research, and there were significant access barriers to participant engagement with online surveying in English for many remote communities where English is the second or third language spoken. It was decided that the least intrusive way to interrogate the impact of First Nations media in these different settings was through case studies, which were based on selecting a representative organisation from each population density type - remote, urban and regional.

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) called for expressions of interest from its membership group and the research team selected three case studies as examples of varying geographic and cultural settings. These case study groups are profiled in the next section. Each case study had a different level of exposure and risk associated with the pandemic. To date, there have been no known cases of COVID-19 in the Central Desert remote communities where PAW Media is based, but the health risk to the community is huge due to an inability to isolate individuals for quarantine purposes and minimal capacity to provide medical support services within local clinics. For example, there are no ventilators in Yuendumu. In contrast to remote community living, the audience of 3KND based in Melbourne has access to large hospitals and social services, but suffered significant mental health impacts from months of lockdown and the very real risk of community transmission with 700+ cases in the Greater Melbourne area in mid-2020.

Over a series of video conference calls and online sessions between researchers and representatives from each case study organisation, it became clear that media responses to the pandemic were two-fold; responses to the pandemic within broadcast teams (the organisational response as media services) and audience responses. In a community media context, it is often impossible to separate journalists from their community. First Nations journalists *are* the community and as such, are licensed as community broadcasting organisations. Their role as sources of information and spokespeople is present both on air and off air in their daily lives.

Therefore, First Nations community reporters supported communities to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic both on air and off air.

On air announcements were just one part of the picture. Broadcasters undertook a broad range of actions within their local areas to ensure people had information and support. To understand this range of activities, semi-formal group interviews were conducted with management across all three organisations and in separate staff team groups for each organisation. These conversations were held via video conference, recorded and transcribed.

We took a community-led research approach to gather information from media consumers. Across a series of discussions with representatives from each case study organisation, we co-designed a set of research questions to ensure consistency across interviews and to draw out key themes. Each media organisation then conducted recorded interviews with community members living within its broadcast footprint. Some interviews were conducted in group sessions, others were individual responses, collated and provided to the research team. Interviewee selection considered gender and age diversity and included responses from some people working in other community organisations. Overall, 30 people contributed their views on the impact of First Nations media during the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial discussions on survey questions and the role of First Nations media organisations in their local communities required consideration of the terminology used to describe the reporting functions broadcasters carry out each day. Broadcasters working within First Nations media organisations relay essential information, report on local and national activities, prepare and present news bulletins, conduct information-based interviews with key people in the community and provide a platform for spokespeople to hold facilitated public discussion. Some broadcasters have undertaken formalised journalism qualifications, others have undergone pathways or accredited screen and media qualifications, paired with on-the-job experience. All carry out journalistic activities and provide long and short-form reporting to their community of interest. To reflect this practice, the terms journalist, community reporter, broadcaster, citizen reporter and media worker are used interchangeably throughout this study. Our research has taken a broad view of First Nations journalism to reflect industry practice, noting the way in which First Nations journalists are embedded with their audience.

# The broadcasters

All three of the case study organisations selected for this report are not-for-profit and First Nations community-controlled. The media organisations are each licensed as community broadcasters providing essential information services to an Indigenous community of interest.

### Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media and Communications (PAW Media)

PAW Media is a Remote Indigenous Media Organisation (RIMO) operating on a hub and as a spoke model from its base in Yuendumu. It provides radio services across a 450,000 square kilometre area in central Northern Territory through ten radio studios in the Ali Curung, Engawala, Kintore, Lajamanu, Laramba, Nyirripi, Ti-Tree, Willowra, Yuelamu and Yuendumu communities, as well as retransmission sites at Imangara, Mt Liebig, and Wilora. Radio services are also streamed online via the organisation's website, the PAW Media app, the indigiTUBE industry showcase platform and VAST satellite channel 918. In addition to its radio coverage, PAW Media produces screen content distributed online and through Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) and National Indigenous Television (NITV). The organisation has a long history of animation work. It was the birthplace of the famous *Bush Mechanics* series, now a touring museum exhibition. More recently, the organisation has expanded its screen-based activities to include virtual reality storytelling, using traditional knowledge to map stories on virtual landscapes.

PAW Media creates content in Warlpiri, Anmatjere, Pintubi and English languages. It has a broadcast team of over 30 people contributing to content creation, supported by 6 administrative/production staff.

### 3KND Kool 'n' Deadly (3KND)

3KND broadcasts across Greater Melbourne on 1503AM, digital radio (DAB+) and online streaming from its studios in Bundoora, Melbourne. Programming is informal and educational including a mix of music and talk-based programs in English. The team includes 9 staff members, most of whom add their voices to the 17-person broadcast team. In addition to its 24-hour broadcast service, 3KND have a strong social media presence, produce podcasts and regularly attend community events to broadcast live from outside the station, connecting audiences from further afield with significant events and conversations in Melbourne. 3KND began broadcasting in 2003 and has provided a training hub for Indigenous broadcasters and journalists ever since.

### Wilcannia River Radio

The 103.1FM radio service in Wilcannia became Wilcannia River Radio in 2009, operating under the Regional Enterprise Development Institute as a service to the Darling River region of New South Wales. The station's catch-cry is 'Keepin' it alive', encouraging community of all ages to come together and celebrate culture and revitalise Barkindji language. Wilcannia River Radio received the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia's Tony Staley Award in 2019 for Excellence in Community Broadcasting, recognising the organisation's work in distributing clean water to its community of approximately 750 people. Wilcannia River Radio employs 8 staff (a mix of full time, part-time and casual workers).

# Background on the
# First Nations Media sector

First Nations broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. Radio services reach nearly 50% of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population but are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding and spectrum availability. The sector reaches a significant audience share with 91% of people in remote Indigenous communities being regular listeners to radio services and watching ICTV at least once per month. [1] In the remote context, First Nations media is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media service available to audiences.

The scope of the First Nations media sector includes:

- Radio: Over 230 radio broadcast sites coordinated by 35 licensed, community-owned, not-for-profit organisations. These radio services able to reach around 320,000 First Nations people, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous communities, or approximately 48% of the First Nations population. They broadcast live shows, plus interviews, radio documentaries, news, emergency information, community events, government and other messaging within community broadcasting guidelines through these platforms:
  - 157 stations broadcasting on FM
  - 4 stations broadcasting on AM
  - 13 broadcasting via VAST satellite, in addition to FM services.
  - 5 metropolitan services broadcasting via DAB+, in addition to FM services in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Darwin.
  - Almost all offer online streaming via a dedicated station website.
  - Many offer on-demand content either through the station's own website, or Soundcloud or podcast sites.
  - 26 stations can be streamed via the indigiTUBE website and app. Some stations also have their own application or use the TuneIn or iHeartRadio apps to reach audiences.
- Video & film production: Production of culture and language-based content for broadcast & online distribution.
- TV: National (NITV) and regional (ICTV) TV services; local TV services (Goolarri TV at Broome, Larrakia TV at Darwin). ICTV satellite TV service reaches 240,000 remote households.
- Print and Online: A national newspaper (Koori Mail) alongside a strong web presence of journalistic sites such as IndigenousX.
- First Nations media organisations have a strong social media following and publish content online daily.

These channels offer a wide range of programming, including news and current affairs reporting from a First Nations perspective, in over 25 Indigenous **languages** nationally, including the first language of many people in remote communities.

[1] *McNair yellowSquares, Indigenous Communications and Media Survey, 2016.*

News production within the sector includes national, regional and local news and current affairs services for broadcast, as well as print and online news media, such as:

- National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS) and its National Indigenous News and Weekly News-in-Review
- Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's news service
- Koori Radio and Bumma Bippera Media's current affairs programming
- NITV News and Living Black
- ICTV Community News presented in three Indigenous languages
- Print media through the Koori Mail

The sector is based in local communities and employs local people as broadcasters and media producers. It is a local and trusted voice, attracting listeners who want to hear about their own communities, in their own language, sharing positive Indigenous stories. [2] Social Ventures Australia found that strengthening First Nations broadcasting strengthens community through communication, culture and employment. For this reason, First Nations broadcasting returns an average $2.87 in social outcomes for every $1 invested, with many organisations returning a rate much higher than this nearly 3:1 average ratio.

[3] The communications sector provides enabling services to support opportunities and outcomes in service sectors, such as health and education, and promotes inclusiveness and participation [4]

The First Nations media industry currently employs between 500-600 staff around 79 per cent of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This includes part-time and casual employees, working in organisations in urban, regional and remote locations. Approximately 28 per cent of those positions are full time, with 72 percent part-time or casual.

A strong First Nations owned media industry enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access to relevant news, information services and emergency warnings and to actively participate in the appropriate delivery of media and information services for their communities. This role was demonstrated through the initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing reporting of changing border restrictions and localised cases.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Social Ventures Australia, More Than Radio – a community asset: Social Return on Investment Analyses of Indigenous Broadcasting Services, 2017.

[4] Department of Communications and the Arts, The Communications Sector: recent trends and developments, Bureau of Communications Research, Commonwealth Government, Canberra, October 2016.

# COVID-19 in Australia

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was identified on 25 January 2020, but it wasn't until March that the pandemic began to require a localised response. The Australian Government closed the borders on 20th March 2020, by which time an emergency health response was in place.

From 16th March 2020, First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) began meeting with communications agencies and Government Departments to access and distribute key information announcements to the First Nations media sector. First Nations Media Australia engaged with 33 Creative to ensure materials approved by the NIAA and the Department of Health were distributed throughout the First Nations media industry. In addition to this role, FNMA collaborated with a broad range of stakeholder organisations across media, health and government industries to connect them with members who could deliver communication services, and to ensure our members were receiving best practice information relative to the pandemic.

This work included:

- Direct engagement with 6 other media sector organisations, including: Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA), Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), National Ethnic & Multicultural Broadcasters Council (NEMBC), Christian Media & Arts Association (CMAA), Radio for the Print Handicapped Australia and the Community Media Training Organisation (CMTO);

- Ensuring all media organisations are represented on 33 Creative's media booking advice to Universal McCann (resulting in sponsorship bookings through Spots & Space);

- Supplying contact information for Queensland based and some national organisations to the Queensland Government;

- Directly approaching Initiative Media to support sponsorship bookings for WA organisations, including the supply of contact information for media buyers;
- Connecting ThinkHQ with 3KND for media advisory work;

- Connecting the Judith Neilson Institute with some media organisations to support the development of a philanthropic relationship;

- Advice to the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association about effective messaging, in consultation with IndigenousX;

- Providing advice and support to the Northern Territory Government and Chief Minister Gunner's office on the production and distribution of messaging within the Northern Territory, particularly relating to biosecurity areas;

- Contributing to the Northern Territory Government's Region 2 Public Information Group; and

- Regular reporting to the NIAA.

A dedicated website was established as a central place for updates, refreshed daily through March and April. The dedicated website for COVID-19 promotional and other official government information linked from the homepage of the FNMA website launched on Thursday the 2nd of April 2020. It was promoted through the FNMA newsletter, social media, direct emails, SMS broadcasts and direct phone calls to members to alert them of the available resource.

In addition to the dedicated COVID-19 website for broadcasters, indigiTUBE featured a dedicated COVID-19 channel on the content sharing and showcase platform. The channel can be viewed here. As of June 2020 it included 68 content resources drawing traffic from Google and electronic direct mail-outs. The most popular pieces of content on the COVID-19 channel at that time were:

1. PAW Media – Travel Restrictions in the NT
2. NITV - Nula story from NITV News on 27 March
3. Luke Carroll on protecting our communities

Representatives from First Nations Media Australia provided feedback and input to communications strategies, message scripting and collateral to tailor information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This information was then distributed to First Nations media organisations as key message information for further adaptation and translation to for localised settings.

A briefing session was arranged for Department of Health and National Indigenous Australians Agency representatives to speak directly with First Nations media organisations about key information from a Commonwealth Government perspective. This information was complemented by State and Territory based updates. On 22 March 2020, the Commonwealth Government closed access to remote communities under the Biosecurity Act. Key messages about community safety specific to remote areas, arrangements for the shutdowns and explanations about the virus and increase of hygiene requirements were translated into Indigenous languages and broadcast across all Indigenous Remote Media Organisations.

# First Nations Media Australia

First Nations Media Australia, as the industry peak body, had a two-fold role in responding to the pandemic. One, to ensure First Nations reporters had clear, timely, relevant and accurate information to keep their communities informed. Two, to ensure First Nations media organisations were supported to continue functioning as businesses with a duty of care to staff.

On April 10, 2020 the Commonwealth Government provided a small amount of funding (approx. $230k) through the National Indigenous Australians Agency to support First Nations media organisations to: purchase small equipment required to facilitate the continuation of services, including capacity to broadcast remotely and to limit shared workspaces and equipment as per individual requirements; support the additional and unforeseen workload involved in producing and distributing key messages in both Indigenous languages and English; and increase support for broadcaster resources through the peak body. Equipment required to provide COVID-safe work environments for essential media workers included laptops and accessories, iPads, pop shields, dongles, headphones, software licensing, handheld recording equipment, video equipment, a mobile printer and specialised cleaning equipment.

Content production took the form of short form announcements (e.g. 30 second spots) in both audio and video formats, interviews in both audio and video formats, animation, partnerships with community leadership to communicate messages recorded in audio and video format, long-form podcasts, news reports, print media stories, online video publication including social media distribution, special program series and songs. Some of the content conveyed messages in more engaging formats such as parody songs to encourage increased hygiene practices.

Some organisations generated news stories, held conversations and rebroadcast materials from other First Nations media organisations without requiring additional funding support to carry out those actions. First Nations Media Australia members reported broadcasting content provided by 33 Creative and directly from Minister Wyatt's office. For example, Cherbourg Aboriginal Media (Cherbourg, QLD), Waringarri Media (Kununurra, WA), Noongar Radio (Perth, WA), Goolarri Radio (Broome, WA), TSIMA (Thursday Island, QLD), TEABBA (Darwin, NT) and Radio Adelaide (Adelaide, SA) each reported that they had played audio grabs from Minister Wyatt on air, addressing the pandemic.

Over the initial few weeks of the pandemic, thirty-two First Nations media organisations across the sector published a total of 1,299 social media posts (from 16 March to 29 April) across Facebook, Twitter & Instagram. Collectively, these posts drew a total of 57,401 reactions and 23,401 shares and re-tweets (to 29 April 2020). Posts continued through May and June, but this sample period provides a relevant snapshot of the immediate response to the pandemic over the first few weeks.

Facebook represented 79 per cent of the post activity, which Twitter represented 16 per cent and Instagram 5 per cent. NITV was the most active organisation on social media and drew the biggest audience. Outside of NITV, Bumma Bippera Media had the largest number of posts on Facebook, while Ngaarda Media drew the most audience engagement. The average number of posts relating to COVID-19 from those organisations who are active on social media was 32 Facebook posts per organisation, or roughly one post every 1.5 days.

To support First Nations media organisations to keep their businesses strong through the pandemic, FNMA ran a Business Health Check webinar series, drawing on expertise from i2iglobal (Indigenous to Indigenous business consultants), KPMG and Grant Thornton. First Nations Media Australia engaged i2iGlobal's Darren Godwell, KPMG's Glen Brennan and Grant Thornton's Anthony Bevan to deliver these webinars and offer phone advice to members on financial management during a crisis.

Between 13 March and 22 April, First Nations Media Australia distributed a total of 11 electronic direct mail-outs (EDMs) and 3 media releases relating to COVID-19 to members, the broader First Nations media industry, stakeholders and other media contacts, totalling approximately 1,757 contacts. A total of 6,905 emails were sent, opened a total of 9,357 times and prompted 1,006 click-through actions to various

COVID-19 related information (to 30 April 2020). Engagement ratios with EDM content reduced over the pandemic period, however members were following up on information we were pointing to, particularly in relation to business support.

In summary, March to June was a particularly busy period for the First Nations media industry with intense activity required in order to respond to the rapidly evolving Government policy. This information is provided as context to the case study examples of how the messaging was relayed by media organisations and received by communities.

Broadcasters at Wilcannia River Radio recognised that FNMA "helped a lot by providing us with resources for our trainees to actually do traineeships at home. They actually provided us with better ways of dealing with COVID during that period." 3KND broadcasters said FNMA "put out a lot of messages and gave support to us as well," which assisted the station's leadership, which improved the wellbeing of both staff and audiences. At PAW Media, broadcasters agreed that FNMA was a vital source of information.

# Discussion

## Responding to the crisis

When COVID-19 hit Australia, it became evident that an immediate response was required to keep the virus out of Indigenous communities. After the destruction in Indigenous communities caused by the H1N1 virus in 2009, where indigenous peoples' unique health disparities were not treated as a priority,[5] Indigenous leaders in the face of COVID-19 called for immediate responses and locking down of community borders. Early in March, the Australian Government's Department of Health created the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 to provide advice to ensure preparedness responses and recovery were planned for COVID-19.

From a media perspective, mainstream Australian broadcasters aired news and advice relevant to larger groups of the Australian public, with occasional opinion pieces on Indigenous Australians. [6] First Nations media organisations served a broader function than simply relaying stories, they provided vital information and services for the communities they represent and are a part of.

First Nations broadcasters become the immediate responders for Indigenous communities in remote and rural parts of the country. [7] For example, there was a COVID-19 positive case within a remote community in Queensland where rapid testing was delayed and Indigenous people were unable to receive culturally safe medical care. Particularly in a situation like this, where governmental responses to Indigenous peoples' needs during the pandemic were not always adequate, Indigenous broadcasting was increasingly important to relay messages in specific and culturally relevant ways. [8]

Mainstream media coverage of Indigenous Australians often leans into a deficit narrative, containing negative stories designed to inform a non-Indigenous audience *about* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rarely assuming Indigenous people to be its audience. The Guardian newspaper produced an article about the overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians in lockdown-related fines.

[9] A simple search through 9-News and 7-News' databases produced mainly negative stories about 'Indigenous Australian' Black Lives Matters protesters during the pandemic. Some mainstream broadcasters, such as the ABC, had less villainising stories that contained accurate information about the situation in Indigenous communities, but Indigenous Australians remained subject of the news story, rather than its intended audience. [10]

By contrast, 3KND responded quickly to the pandemic by creating new programming. It was approached by partner organisation Connection Matters Radio to produce a regular 30-minute bulletin on issues relating to COVID-19. The new daily program was

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[5]  In 2009, when the H1N1 influenza pandemic hit, indigenous Australians were diagnosed, hospitalised and put into intensive care 5-8 times more non-Indigenous Australians were. They were left out of the action plan. For more see: Kerrigan V, Lee AM, Ralph A and Lawton PD, First Nations people leading the way in COVID-19 pandemic planning, response and management, The Medical Journal of Australia, 213, no.4 (2021): 151-152.

[6]  A search for "Indigenous/Aboriginal' AND 'COVID/coronavirus/COVID-19'" on the ABC database returns results only after April.

[7]  Kerrigan, V et al, Stay Strong: Aboriginal leaders deliver COVID-19 health messages, Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 32, no.1 (2021): 202-203.

[8]  McKenna, K, Queensland Government under fire for delaying Indigenous coronavirus rapid testing, ABC, published 15 May 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-15/coronavirus-queensland-indigenous-test-machine-delay-concerns/12253446.

[9]  Taylor, J, Sudanese and Aboriginal people overrepresented in fines from Victoria police during first lockdown, The Guardian, published 28 September 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/sep/28/sudanese-and-aboriginal-people-overrepresented-in-fines-from-victoria-police-during-first-lockdown.

[10]  A simple search for 'indigenous' on the ABC News website reveals this. See for example: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-04/coronavirus covid-19-healthcare-system-australia-vulnerabilities/12016140.

"I feel the messaging is, in the way that it's being done, it feels very inclusive to me.  It feels very pastoral.  I receive it as being very pastoral from the team and I think that that's really quite different to how I experience it from, I don't watch TV very much at all deliberately now."

"3KND make themselves very accessible.  They make it very clear that people can call them up if they want to have a yarn"

3KND listener

on air 48 hours later, a feat the station describes as, "Absolutely unheard of, and pays testament to the fact that we are in unprecedented times."

PAW Media had to respond especially quickly because it provided the only means of relaying important messages in local languages. PAW Media broadcasters recall that when the lockdowns were implemented, *"Everything was coming so hard and fast." Staff started developing their own messages. They were also receiving and translating messaging from the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments and from First Nations Media Australia. "Translating, putting it on radio is obviously so important because we were telling people 'you can't move around, you need to stay put 'and trying to get that out as fast as we could in language as well."*

Paw Media said:

*"The first morning we had a meeting, but then we realised, hang on this is coming fast. We had to really simplify and break it down and just pick four or five key things; roads, community closures, hygiene and to get back to community."*

Throughout the pandemic there were logistical challenges that had to be overcome, often in difficult circumstances. For example, PAW Media had to find a way to fix broadcast equipment that had broken down and deprived a local community of its voice at the time it needed it most. But, as one PAW Media worker explained, it was sometimes difficult to act quickly because the pandemic had created peculiar obstacles: "It took so long to get permits to even get out to communities. We were half-way to a community ringing, ringing 20-30 phone calls, sitting waiting just to get a permit to enter a community to fix a radio so they could get the messaging to not leave the community."

## Repurposing messages

Indigenous community broadcasters had to repurpose general information provided by the government that was often not entirely applicable for a lot of Indigenous Australians. Even sources specifically designed for Indigenous Australians required repurposing from some broadcasters. The 'Keep Our Mob Safe' Booklet, [11] the first written COVID-19 resource targeting Indigenous Australians produced by Government, contains basic headings like "Stay at home" and "Keep 1.5 metres apart" denoting what Indigenous people should do to keep themselves safe during the pandemic. These instructions are not entirely practical for many Indigenous people particularly those in remote communities, where overcrowded housing and intergenerational living is common. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are 16 times more likely to be living in an overcrowded house than non-Indigenous Australians. [12] The third heading is "talk to your doctor".

Culturally appropriate medical care is not always readily accessible for Indigenous people. Indigenous women in particular have reported stereotyping and being turned away in medical settings at an alarmingly high rate, seeking medical care is not always possible. [13] The booklet, that begins with 'hey you mob', fails to have relevance beyond that first sentence. In an article from the ABC, one community member in the town of Yarrabah

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[11]   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness, https://www. aihw.gov.au/getmedia/1654e011-dccb-49d4-bf5b-09c4607eecc8/aihw-hou-301.pdf.aspx. published 29 March 2019

[12]   For articles on this see Incarcerated Aboriginal women's experiences of accessing healthcare and the limitations of the 'equal treatment' principle, Baldry E. Home safely: Aboriginal women post-prison and their children. Indigenous Law Bulletin. 2009;7(15):14–7, Sherwood J. Do no harm: decolonising Aboriginal health research. University of New South Wales; 2010.

in Queensland expressed the following: "we don't have basic access to the nearest towns to get essentials — I'm talking about toiletries, I'm talking about warm clothing." [14] Many people living in remote communities cannot access online shopping or services that are available more commonly to non-indigenous Australians due to a lack of access to technology. A message that tells people to stay home and order groceries where possible is again not relevant for these communities. These generalised government messages were interpreted and repurposed effectively by First Nations media organisations.

Each organisation had its own priorities when it came to messaging. In Wilcannia, there was a need to talk to locals about interacting with visitors passing through on the Barrier Highway, the main route of travel between Sydney and Adelaide. The Wilcannia community instigated its own lockdown due to a lack of government action where residents were isolated from their families. This was considered an essential step for keeping Elders and family members safe from the risk of exposure to COVID-19. In the months that followed this research, the Wilcannia community would be significantly impacted by cases reaching the community and a lack of preparedness support to respond to this reality when it struck.

3KND identified a need to reach the "big huggers" in its audience with special messages about social distancing. This very deliberate choice of wording was designed because "a lot of the messaging might have been a language or a style that wouldn't resonate with our community listeners. It's not just about saying "hey you mob" to make

it resonate, it's about using appropriate sort of language and making it culturally sensitive to our needs".

In this way, First Nations media outlets played a vital role in repurposing announcements to suit their respective communities. The media outlets appreciated they had a responsibility to provide accurate and timely information. Although messages from government and other sources were factual and reliable, that did not automatically mean they were right for Indigenous audiences. At 3KND several broadcasters re-scripted Government messages and brought in station personalities to re-read them because, as one 3KND volunteer explained, "They're known as announcers on 3KND.  They have a presence. They are recognised by the station's audience and I think that is absolutely crucial." The volunteer recalls one community service announcement that did not work because it was too formal. "Oh, for God's sake," he said, "This is not announcing something from NAIDOC or a grant for goodness sake. This is protecting our community and the only way we're going to protect community is to engage with community and doing that on radio is just more than a scripted CSA." Rather than just telling listeners to "wear a mask," broadcasters opted to interview people the listeners would engage with. For example, one program spoke to a young Aboriginal ambulance officer who "really appealed to the community." She told the program, "This is why we need you to wear masks, but don't be afraid of us". There were also understandably difficulties that arose as a result of distrust of government for Indigenous listeners. As one 3KND broadcaster put it "that's been one of the hardest things for me producing this audio

13  For articles on this see Incarcerated Aboriginal women's experiences of accessing healthcare and the limitations of the 'equal treatment' principle, Baldry E. Home safely: Aboriginal women post-prison and their children. Indigenous Law Bulletin. 2009;7(15):14–7, Sherwood J. Do no harm: decolonising Aboriginal health research. University of New South Wales; 2010.

14  Faa, M, Coronavirus laws discriminate against Indigenous Australians, communities say, ABC, published 14 May 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-14/coronavirus-queensland-indigenous-restrictions-yarrabah/12230492.

is telling people what they have to do for a community that's been told what they have to do for 150 plus years."

3KND broadcasters described the challenge as follows:

*"You can't just put a press release out and think you can read it in that way to community because they just won't take that. You can imagine that for many years messaging like that has just been pounded upon Indigenous mob and so the mind doesn't really take it all in. You have to put it into a community language and then that community language you're able to engage and have an impact."*

*"I think it's been particularly important for us to put our own Indigenous community spin on all the messaging. A lot of the messaging might have been a language or a style that wouldn't resonate with our community listeners. It's not just about saying "hey you mob" to make it resonate, it's about using appropriate sort of language and making it culturally sensitive to our needs."*

The station regularly spoke with the heads of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, because they were able to make sense of confusing medical information or dispel rumours. 3KND also drew on releases from organisations, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO). Broadcasters selected the most appropriate information and attempted to present it in engaging ways. They chose the tone of delivery they thought would create the greatest impact. When VACCHO issued a release soon after the first infection occurred in the Indigenous community, Victoria was in the early stages of lockdown and people were becoming alarmed. So, the station

adopted a positive tone with the message that "Everyone's been doing a fantastic job, we're hoping to keep the numbers down and if we can continue these particular practices, this is going to work really well for our community."

Broadcasters often modified the formal language of press releases to ensure messages were "more user-friendly on the ear, that is talking to the people rather than just putting out an across-the-board message." The station added positive music, without being too upbeat. As one broadcaster explained, "You know, this isn't a great time for everyone, so I'm not going to be putting out the bright and sparkly music behind it, but at least it's not depressing and 'warning, warning, warning, you're all going to die'. That's been a really important thing for me that we try and get through this."

The broadcasters had the capacity to produce messages quickly and were sometimes frustrated by the slowness of Government messaging. As a 3KND broadcaster said:

"I'd like it if they said 'Why don't you produce this?' because we can do it same-day-turnaround. We can do this very quickly and we can get it out there, but because of Government procurement, it's got to go through an agency and I had one agency last week say, 'Are you able to put in a booking and if we don't get the audio to you on Tuesday night, it's due to go to air Wednesday, is that okay?' and I said 'Yeah, of course, no worries'. So, I contacted them yesterday and they said 'Oh, we haven't received the audio yet' and it's like, they just had to say, "You can do it." But a lot of the time they overlook our station because we're seen as too small, I think. They don't realise we've got the capacity to do this."

Comments from a PAW Media organiser described a parallel experience in the Northern Territory. "It's also having that relationship. If you're getting information from a white organisation, you're less trusted than when you're hearing your family member on the radio telling you what's happening, you're obviously going to trust someone that you know and have a relationship with, rather than someone who lives in a completely different place and has no understanding of community. "

"As much as it was about translating and relaying information. If that information was coming from somewhere else it would have been so scary. So much of what our job was keeping morale, keeping the community safe by not freaking out or ignoring. Not saying whatever I'm going to go to town anyway, or not saying, "Oh my God we're all going to die'".
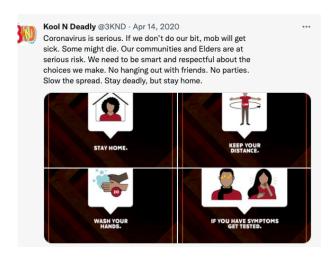
PAW Media broadcasters found that some of the messages they needed to repurpose were mistranslated and needed correction to make them relevant to audiences in the Central Desert regions.

*"All of the information that we were getting we had to rework anyway. We actually got info from Darwin that had been translated into Warlpiri, but it had to be retranslated. The translations didn't really make sense. It was so much about listening to people's concerns that were here. There was general news that we had to put out , these are the rules about the roadblocks, you've got to wash your hands, etc. but it was actually so much about what people in the community were worried about how they were coping with it and how we could help the people living here."*

Broadcasters emphasised that repurposing messages effectively meant: "making realistic information. If you feel sick, stay with your family or if someone else is sick deliver them food, things that were realistic. There's lots and lots of people living in one house, social distancing is just not possible, so we need to give relevant messages." Interviews with these organisations painted an astonishing picture of the work that indigenous media organisations do beyond relaying messages. Wilcannia facilitated their own lockdown through radio in part, PAW translated messages every single day and retranslated inadequate translations from what were often more generously funded bodies, 3KND attempted to dispel governmental distrust that has been building for 100+ years to deliver critical health information, the labour of repurposing messages often goes far beyond that of mainstream media organisations, and often with far more serious consequences.

## Mediums and platforms

Radio was the main medium used by the three First Nations media organisations. But each outlet also used social media to relay messaging. At 3KND, broadcasters extended the reach of their programs with posts on the station's, and their own, social media accounts. Content tended to be posted on the most appropriate platforms, reflecting either the nature of the subject matter or the audience the station was trying to reach. For example, one broadcaster posted material on wearing masks on several sites, including Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, because he wanted to convey that the free masks he was giving away on-air were easy to wear. "I'd be by myself in the studio, but dancing a little bit, playing music in the background or just trying to liven it up because when you are giving out a free mask, you don't want it to be like

*3KND tweeted about the danger of Covid-19 and advised listeners about social distancing in culturally appropriate ways.*

'This is a mask to stop you from getting COVID because it's dangerous'. We get that, but you want it to be fun: 'Oh, we've got trendy masks going out to the community for free, how exciting is that?'"

At PAW Media, Facebook worked well in Yuendumu but further afield in remote communities it was of little value because most people deal with the reality of limited, or zero, access to the internet. This made communicating difficult, especially on occasions when a transmitter, or another piece of radio equipment, had broken down and was unusable for lengthy periods of time.

Wilcannia River Radio had embraced Facebook but did not use other social media platforms. A broadcaster explained that this was because "a lot of our trainees are just going into a learning phase" and not many people in the local community are using either Twitter or Snapchat. The station found Facebook "was the most effective mechanism that we can use throughout our community." Wilcannia also experimented with video and produced messages about social distancing and staying safe.



*Wilcannia River Radio produced this video to remind the audience about social distancing and the need to wash hands.*

*PAW Media produced a creative video to show alternative ways to greet friends during the pandemic.*

## Self-generated messages

First Nations Media outlets responded quickly to changing circumstances. This happened in Victoria when Greater Melbourne and the Mitchell Shire went into lockdown, followed by Geelong and other regions. 3KND had to constantly change scripts for its community service announcements. It had to explain which areas were locked down, which were in Stage 3 or 4 and what those different stages meant. But it also needed to think about who was being turned off by all the information being delivered. As one 3KND broadcaster said, "It was about getting the information out." But it wasn't as simple as putting all the information in one announcement because that would become "almost like a five-minute ad.  You're going to lose a lot of listeners and people are going to go, 'I'm sick of hearing this'".

So, the station adapted the messages and broke the information down, creating several smaller announcements. "We hope that that way people will hear it, they'll hear it more frequently and they'll start to take it in, but without getting so annoyed with it that they turn it off." This demonstrated an awareness of the audience, as well as deep concern that the information actually reached the people the station serves.

This balancing act has not always been easy, as another 3KND broadcaster explained: "It's been quite difficult just trying to find that healthy balance because a lot of it is important, but you don't want to feel like you're preaching too much and we're already seeing it everywhere else where you step out to the shops or even on TV and stuff like that."

## Innovative programming

First Nations media outlets had to innovate throughout the pandemic. In Wilcannia, where the community is relatively small and close-knit, locals interact with one another and expect to have face-to-face contact with local services, including the radio studio. As one broadcaster said: "That's been sort of like the culture at the radio station." The broadcasters said it was difficult to change the inclusive way they worked "It was very hard to kind of cut that straight away, it was a very hard practise, something that we've done for, what,

*Wilcannia River Radio worked with Wilcannia Central School to create a powerful version of "From little things big things grow", which was shared widely on social media.*

ten years in operation. " It also meant it was difficult to conduct live interviews, especially as the station didn't have the capacity to do phone interviews.

The station decided to make some concessions: "We only allowed our local police, our local Mayor or manager of the Shire and our health workers to be on." They scheduled a day each week or fortnight for key people to go on-air in the studio to provide up-to-date reports about local and regional pandemic issues. In addition, at the end of each shift, broadcasters were given products to clean the screen, panel and the microphone. "That was the way we practised it," said the broadcaster.

Wilcannia River Radio found it was able to help the community in unconventional ways. When the school was forced to close, students were having trouble accessing on-line classes because the internet wasn't widely available. So, the station stepped in and "delivered education programs through radio." The station helped the school produce a music video, which became such a positive experience, it was extended and led to a successful funding application for a "little

radio station in the school property." As a result, "the school is going to be broadcasting an hour per day on radio through an OB unit system with whatever they want to deliver which is about helping them develop communication, building confidence, getting stories out about the elders and the school activities."

*"We made a few segments, one we called PAW news, which was about trying to keep everyone up to date and have news in language, short little videos that are easy to understand. We did a few animations and posters about staying in community and not travelling into town when those travel restrictions happened and we also did a little section called 'Ask PAW', where you'd get questions from the community and then put the answers out in English and in language to try and help disperse misinformation and rumours about COVID."*

Broadcasters at PAW Media told us that as much as getting the relevant health messages out there was important, doing it in a way that made things less fear-driven and more familiar was of equal importance. "There was a really amazing way of being creative

*PAW Media produced creative videos to remind community members to wash their hands to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.*

in sharing these messages. we started doing artworks to make posters, there was a jingle. So that for me felt really important in that it wasn't just translating the government messages we got, we were upskilling and being creative."

PAW Media produced creative videos to remind community members to wash their hands to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

## Myth-busting and countering misinformation

While the pandemic exposed a crisis where nations that had deprioritised pandemic [15] preparedness funding suffered catastrophic economic and human losses, it also exposed another crisis; that of global misinformation. In the early months of the pandemic, the World Health Organization declared an 'infodemic'. [16] A surplus of information and misinformation surrounding the virus made it almost impossible to distinguish between what was

'fake news' and what was trustworthy and authentic medical advice.

A study by Canberra University found that for coronavirus information Australians trusted health professionals the most (85%), followed by governmental messages (66%), with news organisations being the least trustworthy (52%). People interviewed also believed that the media (38%) and social media (36%) exaggerated news about the virus and its impacts, compared to the government (18%). [17]

Similarly, a study from the Journal of Medical Internet Research found that being more likely to absorb misinformation about COVID-19 "was associated with younger age, male gender, lower education level, and language other than English spoken at home". [18] In the Northern Territory alone, 61% of Indigenous Australians speak a language other than English at home. [19] As mentioned above, there exists a double layer of difficulty

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[15]  World Health Organisation, Pandemic Preparedness, https://www.who.int/influenza/preparedness/pandemic/en/ published 11 December 2020

[16]  World Health Organisation, Call for Action: Managing the Infodemic, https://www.who.int/news/item/11-12-2020-call-for-action-managing-the-infodemic, published 11 December 2020

[17]  Sora Park et al, COVID-19: Australian news and misinformation, News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, (2020):6

[18]  Ayre J, et al, Contextualising COVID-19 prevention behaviour over time in Australia: Patterns and long-term predictors from April to July 2020 in an online social media sample, PLoS ONE 16, no.6 (2021): https://doi.org/ 10.1371/journal.pone.0253930.

[19]  Glynn-Mcdonald, R, Indigenous Languages Avoiding a Silent Future, Common Ground, https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/indigenous-languages-avoiding-a-silent-future, published January 15, 2021

when accessing correct information for many Indigenous Australians. Aside from the surplus of misinformation, even when correct messages were available to Indigenous Australians, they were often not culturally or linguistically appropriate.

Puntukurnu Aboriginal Medical Service (PAMS) in the East Pilbara noted that a lack of vaccine information in language was available to communities in the area. They called for targeted COVID-19 vaccine advertising to be translated into Indigenous languages to counter misinformation that was spreading around remote communities. Reportedly, 'fake news' on social media was creating apprehension and doubt among many with regards to the vaccine.

At Yuendumu, PAW Media became aware that at least one community believed praying and gospel singing would be enough to fend off infection. PAW Media responded by working with the locals' beliefs. It encouraged listeners to "keep praying, keep singing gospel, but also wash your hands, practice social distancing, all those things." Everyone remained safe, but another fear emerged because PAW Media realised several members of the community believed "that they didn't get Coronavirus because they did pray." PAW Media was concerned that when lockdown ended and borders reopened, community members might ignore instructions to practise social distancing because the community would say, "Well we don't need to practice any of this stuff because we've already been through it and praying is the reason that it didn't come here."

PAW Media said one of the biggest myths was that COVID couldn't survive above a certain temperature:

"The biggest ones I heard were sitting by a fire you'll be fine. There was some medical information that the virus couldn't survive over a certain temperature, that's come down into the virus can't live in hot temperatures, we'll be fine and if we're near a fire we can't get it"

PAW Media created messages in response "we did a few animations and posters about staying in community and not travelling into town when those travel restrictions happened and we also did a little section called 'Ask PAW,' where you'd get questions from the community and then put the answers out in English and in language to try and help disperse misinformation and rumours about COVID."

"A lot of mainstream media wasn't really being watched…Or wasn't relevant to here specifically. There was a lot of missed or mixed interpretation…rumours. That's where our segment 'Ask PAW' came from, it was about mythbusting in some ways."

Broadcasters said mythbusting involved respect, rather than telling people their beliefs were outright wrong. This nuanced approach was only possible from a community broadcaster with a close personal relationship with the community that it services and holding an understanding of the confluence of cultures that reside there. "Yuendumu is a bunch of cultures coming together. Like Yapa (visitors to there) culture, Kardiya (people from there) culture and even like a sort of religious culture. So they're always in negotiation of potentially different or opposing beliefs, so it's not about devaluing what someone might believe or have faith in, but more so attempting to educate in your way and focussing on keeping people safe. We don't want anyone to get sick or hurt."

At Wilcannia River Radio, broadcasters were finding that information on Facebook was often wrong and needed to be countered with material from reliable sources, such as local health workers or First Nations Media Australia or state and Commonwealth Governments. The station arranged regular interviews with local health workers and people who were able to give up-to-date and relevant information. As one Wilcannia broadcaster said, "It was really important for us that we got everyone to understand that this is the right message. We got the message straight from primary health." One broadcaster summed up their role: "Myth busting was a big part of our messaging, definitely. Dispelling all of those myths that existed. The false information that was everywhere all over Facebook and social media. There was definitely a lot. I'd go 'that's not true. You need to make sure that you know…'"

## How messaging changed over time

To battle audience fatigue, broadcasters experimented with new approaches. One volunteer at 3KND started "sharing really cool stuff on social media like astronomy, live videos, beekeeping, workshops and free stuff that people can do." She said this was important because "everyone's sort of so over-consumed with COVID." Because people were stuck at home, she believed "people's imaginations needed something a little bit more." Instead of just providing information, she attempted to inspire people. "I think we also need to spark some magic back into people's lives and really embrace people and their culture and their practices at home but also all those really great interesting things that are happening out there…We need to get out of the box of COVID a little bit too so we can be a bit more safe with our emotional wellbeing at home, if you're locked at home."

"Staff have been impacted by the site type of messages because we're using it for voice ups and using community to voice ups in putting the messaging out there, which after a while because it's so long, because we're in a different phase, because we're into community lockdown regions, those messages have become very long, as you start putting postcodes out for those in Victoria would know, postcodes.  So a 30 second message now is about two minutes."

PAW Media stressed how important it was that local voices were speaking to local Indigenous people about the issues that mattered to them:

When asked what they thought would happen if PAW Media wasn't available to the community, one listener responded: **"Oh no, there'd be no messages. People [might] go to town and get the virus and come back, they'll be all affected".**

At 3KND, broadcasters found there was a constant need to refresh messages:

"Because I understand a lot of people saying 'I've stopped listening' or I've stopped watching the news, it's too depressing'.  So, you've got to keep good music going and intersperse these little short messages almost subliminally to get it through."

*"When you get told that body bags are being sent and all services have been cut, you just kind of think 'alright well, we are all by ourselves and no one cares'...We became the one thing that you could trust. The ABC is not relevant here. It's not watched, it's long and boring and not relevant. We are the spot where people would actually go for their information that was relevant to them. We weren't talking about case numbers in Victoria, we were talking about what mattered here. Without that, I do wonder what information would have been here in the community and if it was just relying on these [incorrectly translated] posters from Darwin, without us how people would have reacted. Would they have really understood that you can't go to town anymore? How seriously would it have been taken? What would have happened in our communities?"*

PAW Media Staff

# Above and beyond broadcasting

The relationship between audience and producer in Indigenous remote communities is often a lot less bureaucratic than that of some mainstream media. Producers are community members, and audiences are heavily involved in content creation. A 2009 study of Indigenous community media organisations recorded an interview with an Indigenous community radio organiser who stressed the importance of Indigenous media in their communities: "The audience are the producers and we get constant feedback from them as to what they want and also that they're prepared to just get up there and do it themselves and the separation of production processes from audience - it's a unique situation; it's something that the government should treasure". [20] In a very real sense, first nations media audiences and broadcasters are extremely close.

This closeness is seen in the ways First Nations media organisations work thoroughly with the community to deliver extra-broadcast services. For example, when 3KND realised that some members of the audience were "getting tired" of depressing news about COVID-19 some of the broadcasters decided to "have to look at what we are doing to engage the community outside of the radio sphere." Broadcasters contacted listeners personally to see if they were okay. "I think that combined approach by us has been very heartfelt and ensured the messaging we were putting out was trusted." The station sourced supplies from partner organisations such as Bunnings and Rotary to assist community members in lockdown. "It was really fun to get to meet some people and help people," said one broadcaster. "We've handed out body washes and then we handed out some more fun things like face masks, which is still hygienic, but just make you feel a bit better. We gave out some toys because there's a lot

of kids in isolation and restrained at this time. We also gave out some bikes, some scooters and specific care packages for certain people."

The broadcaster said she was "really impacted by the donations of the Rotary Club and the connections of 3KND because they made it very clear that they were going to try and help everyone, but they had a focus on the people they knew needed it and then, reached out a bit more and more, and then dispersed it like that." Another 3KND staff member said: "Some of our staff had cooked food. We've collected from our own monies as well and put it in to support people because they wanted [help] in real time. We don't want to fill out an application or ask another organisation who might take hours or days just to get back to that family."

Wilcannia River Radio worked with a local church, which had received donations from a major supermarket. They had "more than 200 bags of food which is all of your major supplies like your milk, bread, sugar, flour, toilet paper, as well as cereals, even rice, pasta, pasta sauce, so all of the stuff that the community can use to make meals and also just get them through to the next week. And we done a big delivery to that. We had more than what was for the community so we just set it up so the houses that had three families living in the one house so we gave them two bags and like the young people given one bag. It took us all day just to do one area just to get it all out delivered and all of that. But that was a big help from the local church."

A full lockdown was difficult in Wilcannia because the town is on the highway between Broken Hill and Sydney. The locals were worried that people passing through would not observe safe distancing, so the station

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[20]  Meadows, M, *Electronic dreaming tracks: Indigenous community broadcasting in Australia, Development in Practice, 2009 19:4-5, 514-524, 515*

worked with the Shire, the police and local Aboriginal leaders to create some workable restrictions on movement. "We kind of put our own voluntary lockdown program in place where we put signs up on either side of the highway asking people to respect our wishes of stopping only if it was on a necessary basis. What we then did was allocate one place where, if they need to go use the toilets, we had one location, and through the Central Darling Shire they had workers to go out there every 15 minutes or so to make sure that those toilets were clean just to minimise any risk. That's about all we could do in our strategy."

3KND broadcasters noted the station received more positive feedback than usual, and from a wider range of listeners, who appreciated the station's content and approach. "What we've found is that a lot of organisations, Indigenous organisations, non-Indigenous organisations, local government and so forth, that we wouldn't normally hear from so much, whether it's the CEO, whether they're case managers, they're project managers, their team, their employees, they have contacted us just to say 'thank you'. It surprised us that wow they were listening and they're listening in detail over this whole period. We don't get that from a survey. We don't get that sort of amount of engagement on a survey. But they are definitely engaging now."

PAW Media workers took it upon themselves to put up posters displaying COVID-safety information around Yuendumu as a visual reinforcement of their online messaging and in the absence of any other organisations providing information services.

"PAW was the only business that stayed open apart from the clinic. The school shut down pretty quickly, so did YDAT youth programs stopped, the art centre closed, Centrelink closed which was a big hit. Jobkeeper came in and Centrelink closed their doors. We were the business that everyone was coming to with questions."

Several listeners at Wilcannia felt that the government could have done more to keep their community safe, one listener said their community was particularly vulnerable due to the proximity to the major highway and because of the vulnerability of youth in the community. The listener said the government *"should have done more for the young kids, keeping them off the streets".* They felt Wilcannia River Radio was more valuable to them, providing them with support and information when they were separated from their families. Several community members went so far as to say that they felt more serviced by the radio station than the Government.

## Broadcaster Health and wellbeing

As the pandemic has developed, there has been a danger that the people who are working hard to maintain community morale might themselves succumb to depression and anxiety. Even in the early days the stations realised that if they were going to survive the long months of restrictions and isolation they needed to focus on the welfare of their staff, as well as the wellbeing of their audiences.

At 3KND the station manager said, "the fact that everyone is doing it tough is also a factor in making us all feel down at times. You're not just dealing with the physical aspects of avoiding contact with people or not catching COVID, or if you've got it, what you need to do. It's also about the impact of the isolation.'"

The general manager said, "Many are at home working.  Many aren't dealing well in that space and have counselling daily.  I bring some of them in once a week, if not twice a week, just to give them a sense of being part of the team, being valued. I think that's an important word, "valued". So when they come in and they're a part of us and they can talk to us.  There's laughter.  The laughter comes about through nervousness and uneasiness and things that's happening internally."

"As a manager, you look at all these things.  You don't just look at that person clocking on and clocking off.  They share with you their environment, their state of mind and wellbeing and in what has not been said it's also been transmitted to you.  That's what you get from an Indigenous organisation and Indigenous mob, that you look at the whole message, not just what is given to you verbatim. I'm lucky that I'm strong. I'm lucky that I've got a team around me because delegation is an important thing to give them roles as well."

First Nations media organisations helped each other throughout the pandemic by keeping in touch. "We communicate with each other around the country," explained a station organiser. "We send text messages or little short videos that just charge each other up because sometimes we feel we're very alone but also we don't want to share a lot of our stuff, with people that don't understand our situations and our role when it comes to community broadcasting.  We seem to be more open to each other that are in those roles than we would be to everybody else, because that person gets it.  That person understands it.  When we do that to each other, whatever hour of the day or night, because sometimes we get messages all hours of the early morning towards each other just saying "Hope you're doing okay brother" or "Hope you mob are all good" and backwards and forwards.  When we do

that at those moments gee it means a lot.  That internal communication line is just as important as formal channels."

## Fear, anxiety and stress

Every region of Australia has experienced heightened fear and anxiety for at least some period during the pandemic. A Canberra University study found that 60% of Australians interviewed felt 'extremely' concerned about the coronavirus. For Indigenous communities where around 50% of adult First Nations people live with one of the major chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, kidney disease or cancer; and almost one-quarter have two or more of these chronic conditions, this concern is intensified. Indigenous Australians are at a notably higher risk of poor outcomes from the disease.

Further cause for fear and anxiety came for urban Indigenous people, who faced the compounding issue of increased rates of criminalisation during the lockdowns. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 4.7% of the fines, despite making up just 0.8% of the population in Victoria.  These are issues unique to Indigenous communities. These issues are mentioned in mainstream media stories, the motivation for such commentary is somewhat untrustworthy. However, Indigenous media organisations like 3KND told these stories in order to inform and teach their audiences, rather than to vilify, specific community-oriented support came from first nations media organisations.

About one-quarter of Indigenous Australian households (and almost one-half in remote and very remote locations) don't access the internet from home, compared with the national average of 14.7%, so advice to stay up to date with health websites and other online resources are not always applicable for all Indigenous Australians.

COVID-19 has also compounded existing issues in Indigenous communities. The issues that Indigenous people continue to face during the COVID-19 pandemic are often more complex than those of non-Indigenous Australians, and at the outset were not accounted for in mainstream media. The pandemic has increased rates of domestic violence nationwide. This issue affects Indigenous women 35 times more than it does non-Indigenous women. Messages around women's' safety is thus a concurrent issue. Some Aboriginal organisations in the Northern Territory have expressed concern that this will also become apparent for Aboriginal women in communities. The rhetoric and discourse in government and the media that shames people for leaving their homes could also present additional barriers for women seeking help."

The community's anxiety was evident at 3KND where the station experienced many more phone calls than usual from people seeking reassurance and company. The station reported an excess of 40 calls from community members during the breakfast program alone, requesting further information or clarity on information reported. In response, 3KND kept its receptionist on duty at the front desk five days a week while other staff were sent home. The Station Manager attributed this to the negative impact of isolation on elders and the community, and increasingly on young listeners as well. The calls were often redirected to the station's senior and junior staff, who, with a friendly voice, discussed the callers' concerns. "Our conversations with those have been very helpful but they end up into not so much a counselling process but very much one that involves them just wanting to talk about their day and thank us for the music we're playing or the conversations that we're having." In this sense, 3KND was providing bespoke support

for emotional wellbeing and reassurance to its audience.

This in turn led the station to reflect about what was happening. "It forced us to really educate the staff and what this meant and how it might impact on community mob, so we all had to educate our own selves.

"A lot of the callers have been various ages and those requests have been 'I'm cold. I'm lonely. None of the family visit, they're all afraid because I'm an elder. They're afraid that they might be the one that gives me the virus, gives us the virus, me and my wife or my family and so that don't come. Can you come and stand outside and talk to me from the door? Can you bring some firewood because I'm cold and I want to do smoking ceremony. I've got some food but I need some other help with some other items, please.' We received a lot of those calls over the last four to five months."

Over time there were fewer requests for food as organisations like Rotary stepped in to help. But the calls seeking companionship increased. "What we're finding is that because we're in their homes every day, they have a relationship with their radio station. They have a relationship with us as part of their community. If they can't have a lot of their family contact, they definitely turn it onto us and engage our broadcasters throughout the day and evening."

The community's need was most pressing during the night shifts, from midnight to 6am, when listeners woke up by themselves. "They're afraid. They're lonely and they want a broadcaster to be talking to them. We can't cover all of that. We can put in some voice tracks, but it's the phone ringing they want. They want to hear that person's voice talking to them because we're again, being as their family."

In Wilcannia there was heightened fear because the town is on a major highway. The station wanted listeners to understand that they should not "take Covid lightly because once it affects our community it really will affect the community in a big way." To do this it focussed on the community's cultural practises. "Our community, like a lot of other Aboriginal communities, we are a very social, inclusive group, we love to get together, play cards, we love to get together just to be part of our extended family, so knowing that one person could actually infect this whole community within a matter of days." The station urged people to keep practising culture "but know in our culture we have to limit ourselves."

"One thing that we tried to get out there was the families from out of town like Broken Hill, Meningie and others, even though they want to come in and meet their grandkids, meet their grandparents, that could be a potential risk so we wanted to make sure that all the communities as well take it serious when they come into, come back home."

It was especially difficult when the community had to deal with Sorry Business. "We had a lot of loss, especially during the Christmas, we had a lot of loss so there was a lot of funerals happening and in fact we had one particular funeral where the young girl who unfortunately committed suicide and this whole community was in such a traumatic state that we had to find a way where the families that did not live in Wilcannia can come but did not affect us. So what we did is end up having the service out in a park where people stayed their social distance and then when it came to the time to bury the loved one, just the main family [went] there. We were very like, sort of like, not on the group but we were a significant part to

help community people and organisations to understand what we need to do. So that's basically what we did during this whole period."

A 3KND broadcaster said: "I worry that we need to be very supportive of each other in all this. So, that's why when I'm doing particular messaging about this, I'm trying to make it so it's not alarmist. That's my big thing. So, say if for example, in another 10 days we come out of stage four and we go to stage three and there's another blow out and we all head to stage four again, we'll need to be really aware of what the impact that would have, for example. I mean, let's hope it doesn't go to that, but I've been watching what's happening overseas. They're starting to head towards autumn and winter. They've all been going out because they've been under lockdown, they've all been going to the beach and like "I am over this" and this is one of those things. It only takes a little chink in the armour and it takes off again."

"So, I'm aware that we'll need to be somehow trying to ask people to keep up with the game. Don't let your guard down too much. It's not going away yet and we're all so over it that we all want to go back to the Koori Cuddle Club, we all want to go back to sitting down having cups of coffee and not having to lift up your mask to have your cup of coffee. It's one of those things, you think, 'Oh, this is really annoying' and people say, 'Oh, it's getting so hot wearing a mask. I can't wait to take it off' and it's like, 'Well, aren't you glad you're not in India and you're on the waiting list to see if you're going to get one of those respirators or not?' Without trying to be too depressing about it."

In Wilcannia the community's biggest concern was the health and welfare of the Elders. "We've got a lot of Elders here that are, their immune system's not as strong so we try to make sure that they're safe and that they're protected and that because over a few years we've actually lost a couple of our Elders and that really had a big impact on the town and community, the youth, the middle aged, a lot of them are sort of, not went downhill but still emotionally broken from that."

The fear for people's safety was intensified because travellers insisted on camping close to the town. "That's probably one of the biggest things from the community side is local travellers camping without permission, camping on the riverbanks close to town and staying for weeks just avoiding going to their hometown, instead of them being locked in their own homes they use small towns like Wilcannia, Meningie to basically hide out from the police where the police are sort of not really, we tried to tell the police, the police go down and check them out, what are you doing, they don't really enforce anything."

"I think after a long period of time we weren't worn out but we became really frustrated and angry that hang on, we put signs up everywhere and they were getting ignored. I know about ten community people that just came up to myself going, 'You know what, we've got a COVID sign right there to say please do not stop here and there was three cars and caravans right in front of it.' The people are standing outside with their coffee, having a smoke standing right in front of the sign...There's literally travellers just sitting there saying, 'You know what, we don't actually have to listen'".

Another Wilcannia broadcaster agreed: "We had one where it was like three blocks long of travellers all in a line waiting to get fuel, the police actually had to come down to move them, to try and tell them, look can yous, if you've got enough fuel to at least get to Topar because the whole community was getting really frustrated where there was at least 20 cars with caravans taking up three blocks. Communities couldn't drive down, communities were getting very frustrated, very angry, to the point where they were, not arguing but putting their point across to the travellers saying why are yous pulling up here, why are yous travelling. The majority of them were from Victoria."

For PAW Media and the communities in and around Yuendumu, fears about COVID were understandable:

"When we first started, because there were cases in Alice Springs, Darwin and Katherine, we thought it was coming to our community. And once we have one case here, we are all susceptible, so the youth services were trying to encourage people to move out to outstations and move out bush and to help facilitate moving communities out to where they could be safer. We were preparing for the worst. There was a period of time where it was really scary, if one person had it we all had it and you know, there's renal patients and sick people and old people and yeah, we didn't know what was going to happen, our clinic can only service a certain amount of people. You're getting information that Alice Springs is not gonna take people, or you're not gonna be airlifted so I mean I thought at one period of time we were kind of going to be left on our own to survive and a lot of people were unfortunately going to pass away."

One listener felt that the messages from PAW Media alerted the community to the severity of the virus, and prompted people to abide by a new set of rules: ***"It made us feel aware that the virus is, you know, deadly. And it made us, you know, get into our safe zone."***

While the same listener acknowledged the importance of Elders and said they were always his primary source of reliable information, he felt the messages from PAW Media were important. In fact, he said he ***"stopped sharing drinks with the family and that, yeah...stopped visiting other people's houses."***

## Trust and language

Indigenous Australians have a long history of being antagonised and misrepresented in mainstream media, and therefore understandably trust in this source is low. There is a recognised phenomenon in which, as Professor of Journalism at the University of Canberra Michael Meadows has explained, "Indigenous voices remain suppressed in mainstream news coverage of events in which they are deeply implicated."

An FNMA survey in 2016 found that 80% of Indigenous respondents regularly listened to broadcasts from remote Indigenous media organisations, 91% reporting that they 'sometimes' listened to these stations. The reasons they gave for listening included "to hear people talking in my own language" and "for the Indigenous focus in news/programs". With such a large percentage of Indigenous people going to these stations for their information, the impact they had on keeping COVID-19 numbers down could potentially have been immense. In this sense, Indigenous controlled media became a matter of survival.

In Australia, where First Nations media organisations made the health information presented to their communities localised and unique, we saw very few cases of COVID in remote and rural indigenous communities. Other indigenous communities, like those in North America and Brazil suffered extremely high rates of coronavirus.

While this is undeniably attributed in large part to poor government policy and inaction, those communities also reported a lack of culturally appropriate messaging, let alone messaging that was in language. Indigenous communities in Brazil have cited poor internet connection and a surplus of messaging in Portuguese, rather than in Indigenous languages, as factors which made keeping communities safe almost impossible.

Wilcannia River Radio ensured that the language it used could be easily understood by listeners. Instead of using what one broadcaster described as "nasty big words" they phrased messages in friendly ways and with simple language. And they made the messages inclusive. One broadcaster gave this example; "Hey guys, look, the best way for our town, for our people to be safe, is we need to do this." This, they found was more effective than making messages sound overly formal "instead of saying there's a process, which means, you've got to do part one, part two, part three, part four, (because that's what process sounds like in a language) we go, 'come on family, you mob, my peeps, my people, you know, for us to keep COVID away this is what we have to do.'"

"We didn't exclude ourselves in that conversation. So as a mob this is what we're going to do, this is how, you know, what we need to be, what we need to know, instead of saying 'we need to be aware of' - like that,

[we'd say] 'this is what we need to know, our family'. That's kind of the language that we used, and that's what we actually have to do during this, when we do this work with youths, how do we break this same conversation down so that we're doing it, we're asking the question as a family mob." These linguistic nuances were carefully employed by Wilcannia River Radio, resulting in a higher level of community engagement with relevant advice. Instead of saying 'stay 1.5 metres apart', the station's announcers suggested staying "an arm and a half-length away," or "we'd say yes, you can't put your hand on each other's shoulders, don't…you know, you can't be, no touchy, we have the no touchy syndrome. Stupid things like that."

A 3KND broadcaster said: "I think it's important that people are empowered to take control of their health. I think the more facts that people receive because there's so much, you know sensationalism and hype around it and fear, I feel like it gives people the opportunity to be empowered to make those decisions about their health so, you know, great job. Love to be, you know, more involved in that process. Even though I'm here I'm still here, you know, I've still got the equipment to do the voice overs and be a part of it - but yeah I think you've all done a great job and I know it's been really stressful, it's been hard work, but the people, you know community it's a right to have correct health information so people can make informed choices."

"Just from my experience with 3KND and working in a community, you know, localised voices and localised stories really resonate more with our community, our listening community and our audience more so than a message, from Ken Wyatt. I think it's good to have his messaging in there but I feel like you'll get more likes if you, you know, if the

mob hear, see, you know Uncle Talgium and his community garden than, you know, Ken Wyatt's messaging on staying safe."

"I think people are kind of overwhelmed with also the amount of information. So those lovely stories and community stories and messages from our Elders here and people working in organisations that's what's going to hit home for mob here. That's the likes, that's the engagement and the reach that you'll get particularly on social media and with our listening audience."

One issue that arose for first nations media organisations was translatability of pandemic-specific terms into Indigenous languages. A PAW Media organiser said: "Some of the animations we made, the Walpiri versions would be three times longer, just to try to have enough language around to explain what's going on. The English version you could just use 'contagious' and people would understand, but the Walpiri version, there's seven words going in to try to explain that concept, to make that make sense." The intricate knowledge of Walpiri held by members of PAW Media became essential to convey messages in dire times. PAW also had to do this every time the messages changed. "You'd translate something and then the next day we'd come in and tell these guys, the messaging has changed. Daily, every couple of days we'd have to do something new, translate again." Messages were not just linguistically untranslatable, they were at times conceptually untranslatable. In the remote, huge-family based community of Yuendumu, one PAW broadcaster deliberated between updates: "let's go back to this thing we've been trying to explain; how do we explain social distancing?"

# Lessons

The pandemic amplified the impact First Nations media outlets have on their communities. It also provided many lessons about how First Nations media organisations can best serve those communities. They range from calls for rethinking the way stations work together, to a plea for greater recognition of the role First Nations media plays in times of crisis. For example, at PAW Media, where organisers had difficulty accessing remote locations to repair broadcast equipment, they said remote media should be "classified as an essential service and prioritised in terms of exemptions from the stringent requirements, just as council workers and teachers were exempted. We had to really fight and wait which hampered our ability to do our jobs." PAW Media also suggested that "First Nations media outlets develop a protocol to allow community broadcasters around the country to facilitate access to each other's air waves or internet services.  For example, we had our Lajamanu broadcaster stranded in Darwin.  We had to terminate his employment. And the reason we had to terminate him was, we couldn't provide a workplace for him to be based from in Darwin.  Had we had a reciprocal arrangement with Darwin community radio services, where he could have done his two-hour show, even as a pre-record, had access to broadband to get that stuff to us, we could have continued to employ him.  He could have continued to doing stuff in language that was appropriate for our audience.  I would have been very happy for PAW to be part of an agreement with all the other community stations where we provide a similar service in emergency times".

There are many other lessons:

- Language is crucial. It has to be culturally appropriate and in many places information needs to be relayed in several languages at the same time. It needs to strike the right tone. It also needs to be authentic.

- While Government communication is usually accurate and reliable, it is not necessarily optimal for Indigenous communities.

- The motivations for reporting (particularly on issues that affect Indigenous people) differ greatly between mainstream and indigenous media organisations. The desire to inform and teach is often at the forefront of Indigenous media organisations who serve a community that they are deeply embedded in.

- First Nations media is best-placed to adapt materials for the communities it serves. But this poses challenges around interpretation, translation and delivery.

- There is a need for dedicated funding to employ the right people to ensure communication is timely, accurate and appropriate.

- There are challenges associated with mental and physical fatigue in under-resourced media outlets which service large and/or remote audiences.

- The pandemic has revealed a need for more dedicated First Nations broadcasting services in areas that don't yet have connectivity.

- The pandemic demonstrates the practical, not just theoretical, importance of Indigenous self-determination and self-governance.

- It also underscores the fact that Federal Government funding for the sector has barely shifted since 1996 despite numerous reviews urging increased funding for the sector.

As lockdowns continue and COVID-19 creates ongoing challenges, funding for the sector is a matter of urgency. First Nations media outlets have generated significant impact on the safety of communities during the pandemic through their role as trusted purveyors of information to date and continue this role through the rollout of vaccination programs and smaller outbreaks as the pandemic wears on.
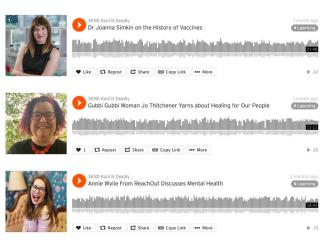
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