Indigenous Television: Let’s spell it out once and for all

By Ellie Rennie
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If you happen to have wandered into the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI, Melbourne) over the past few months you will have seen an exhibition on Australian television. ‘TV50’ followed an A-Z structure rather than a timeline, highlighting genres and themes over historical accuracy (somewhat like television itself). The letter ‘I’ stood for ‘Indigenous TV’. The exhibit was more than a summary of the various groups and agencies involved in making Indigenous content; it was a mock-up of a full, autonomous channel, curated by Indigenous media groups and played-out on a real television set. Melbournians could watch something they have never seen, something strikingly absent from our television history: A national Indigenous television channel.

It was a controversial exhibit, at least amongst the curatorial team (of which I was a part). The government had just completed a review of Indigenous television. A major lobby group within the Indigenous media sector proposed a National Indigenous Television service (NITV), which would sit alongside the ABC and SBS as a government-funded broadcaster, available to all Australian viewers. However, the Minister decided against NITV, allocating $48.5 million over four years for Indigenous television programming, but no national channel. The ‘N’ for National was dropped and we were left with ‘ITV’.

What can we expect to see as a result of this decision? The money has triggered a difficult debate within the Indigenous media sector over how funds should be administered and what type of service will best serve Indigenous audiences. On the one hand, the interim committee (formed out of the National Indigenous Television campaign) wants to use the funds for high quality content, including a news service, for a national audience, with a central office based in a capital city. Indigenous media groups operating in remote areas are hoping the money will allow them to build on their existing activities which are largely community-based and locally sourced. This is more than a city vs. bush situation. The deeper issues involve:

- How best to ensure an ongoing, dynamic Indigenous media presence
- Whether that content should be targeted at the largest possible audience; and
- The development of a sustainable Indigenous screen industry.

Indigenous television currently operates in a somewhat disparate fashion across the commercial, government and community broadcasting sectors. The first autonomous Indigenous television services were pirate stations established in the 1980s in Yuendumu (Tanami desert) and Pukatja (formerly Ernabella, SA). Recognising that Indigenous communities were determined to run their own television services, the government developed the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme in 1987 (BRACS) which provided around 100 communities with an all-in-one radio and television kit, giving them the means to retransmit content from the satellite and to create and insert programming for local broadcast. Although important in the development of
Indigenous broadcasting, BRACS was basically a technical solution and the stations received no administrative support, training or facilities to house the units, leaving many idle or in disrepair. In 2005 the government allocated $2 million towards a TV transmitter rollout project for Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (which included upgrades for former BRACS services, now known as RIBS).

Goolarri Media in Broome produces content and transmits terrestrially to the Broome area via an open narrowcasting licence. The ABC and SBS commission and screen some Indigenous content, but this is limited by schedule-constraints and programming standards. A fully Aboriginal-owned commercial satellite service, Imparja, began transmission in 1988 and is available across one third of the country. Alongside its main channel, which retransmits content from 9, 10, ABC and SBS, Imparja also has an Indigenous programming channel known as ICTV (Channel 31), which is run out of PY Media in Alice Springs. ICTV started out modestly as a means to broadcast documentaries and Aboriginal football matches to BRACS stations. It now broadcasts 20 hours a day of content, up to 80% of which is in Indigenous languages. In 2004 the first inaugural meeting of contributors was held at Ellery Creek Big Hole and the group is now looking to incorporate. The government provides Imparja with a subsidy of $2 million per annum, the bulk of which goes towards satellite uplink costs for radio and television services, including ICTV. RIBS stations access the content and retransmit ICTV on the ground using their terrestrial transmitter. Content is provided by a number of organisations in the Pilbara, Kimberly, Warlpiri, Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara areas.

Why can’t ICTV become the new ITV? For one thing, the ‘C’ stands for ‘Community’ and reflects the fact that ICTV is an access-based service which sources programs from the community rather than commissioning them off producers. This is not entirely what the NITV committee had in mind. PY Media believe that ICTV is regarded as ‘real’ television by Indigenous communities in remote areas and that it provides essential programming which addresses the social and political needs of its audience. They are concerned that the interim NITV committee does not adequately represent remote communities and that the $48.5 million will be spent on slick programming instead of the audience-producer engagement model of ICTV. In other words, the money will end up in the cities, in the hands of a few professionals, instead of being used to develop Indigenous screen culture at the grassroots level. As professional content is expensive and requires months of planning, there will not be enough to fill a full schedule, which will mean that ICTV will be exploited as ‘filler’ programming.

Distribution is also a major issue. When the money begins to flow, programming will be broadcast on existing services including Imparja’s channel 31, free-to-air community television (in the cities where it exists), or Pay TV. ICTV doesn’t have control over its current distribution – Imparja does – leaving the sector in a situation where a commercial operation has the ultimate say on what ITV will be. While the rest of the country debates the merits of two new commercial services on digital TV, the Indigenous sector has been denied the autonomy it dearly needs and which can only be achieved through a stand-alone, free to air television channel.
To complicate things further, a second review is now underway which is looking into the entire Indigenous Broadcasting Program (IBP). When ATSIC was dismantled in 2004, the administration of Indigenous broadcasting was given over to the Department of Communications, IT and the Arts (DCITA) who have developed a new approach for the IBP. The report makes some very good suggestions, including giving Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) responsibility for RIBS services in their area, which will ensure that stations are maintained and have some administration and training needs provided for them. However, the changes are problematic on three fronts: Firstly, as there will be no additional funding, new services will need to be resourced out of the existing pool. Secondly, the model involves allocating funds according to population size, which overlooks the fact that many remote broadcasters face a more complex set of issues (social, economic, geographical and their role in the community) compared to their city counterparts. Finally, the IBP model proposes to end funding for video production and to dedicate all of its funds to radio: ‘in the light of the government’s decision to establish the ITV service, principal funding for video production is likely to be provided through the ITV project’ (DCITA, IBP paper). This statement assumes that the Remote Indigenous Media Organisations will receive the ITV money, which is not guaranteed to happen. If the bulk of the money is spent on Sydney-based productions (such as the proposed ITV news service), then the groups that currently provide programming to ICTV will have no means of producing video. The government is effectively giving with one hand and taking with the other. In the worst case scenario, if no extra money is allocated to ITV and the IBP fund is spent entirely on radio, there will be no Indigenous television in four years time, apart from that which is commissioned by the ABC and SBS. In the short term, unless a significant portion of the ITV money is given to the RIMOs, then we are looking at a division of radio and television within a sector which has, to date, been multi-platform in its practices. It goes without saying that this is a backward step – one that could severely inhibit innovation in the sector, to the detriment of Australia’s creative industries generally.

We only need to look at the success stories in Indigenous dance and fine art to know that Indigenous media may be our best bet in the development of a viable and sustainable Australian screen industry. A nationally available service is vitally important, not only to serve Indigenous people living in the cities, but to raise awareness and interest amongst non-Indigenous Australians. Such a service should not come at the expense of the local and developmental Indigenous television services which have evolved – largely in spite of government policy and at the community level – over the past 25 years. Decisions taken over the next couple of months by both the NITV committee and DCITA will be crucial to the future of Australian television. Let’s hope we end up with both an ‘N’ and a ‘C’ in our ‘I’TV.