Youth media as cultural practice: Remote Indigenous youth speaking out loud

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Abstract: The rapid development of new information and communications technologies, an increase in affordable, small mobile technologies and the penetration of the internet and mobile telephony over the past decade account for an explosion in new modes and channels for communication and multimedia production. Internationally, such developments have led to substantial ethnographic inquiry into youth and the emergence of new social practices surrounding new media. Some researchers posit that digital technologies are enabling new kinds of agency and engagement in learning and others suggest that new thinking about language and literacy has been catalysed. In Australia, accounts of remote Indigenous youth culture in public or policy discourse tend not to portray their agentive participation in new forms of learning, multimodal practice and production or online communication. Additionally, relatively little ethnographic information is available on how Indigenous youth are shaping the creative, cultural and communicative uses of new media, and how and why these practices are taking hold in remote contexts. This paper looks at the uptake of new media technologies in remote Indigenous contexts and the implications for youth learning and cultural practice by tracing the way in which social relations and communication styles have altered across the generations. Data gathered through ethnographic research indicate that where young people have access to new media technologies, expertise is acquired with ease, often leading to the rapid development of new communication practices and new forms of cultural production and public participation. Through participating in collaborative research young people are also reflecting on their changing cultural practice and giving voice to these reflections.

'Hey,' a young man from the Warlpiri community of Lajamanu asks me, 'did you see, on my Facebook page, it's raining fish?'[1] As a regular Facebook user, this young man often hyperlinks to sites and keeps his Indigenous and non-Indigenous Facebook friends alerted to events in and beyond his own remote community. Meanwhile, after recent flooding in the Ngaanyatjarra community of Warburton, a young woman from a different community posts a message on her friend's Facebook wall: 'we seen warbuton on the internet it's flooded big rain aye?' [sic]. The friend in Warburton responds by announcing her movements: 'im thinking to go and help my cousin to clean her houes lots of mud' [sic]. These young people, like an increasing number of their peers in remote Indigenous Australia, are utilising the internet and social networking sites to upload

their multimedia productions, comment on each others' mobile phone 'pics' and announce the immediacy of their activities with online chat. They are also using these channels to air their thoughts and the cultural activities and concerns of their community.

I use these anecdotes to introduce this discussion on the many ways in which Indigenous youth in remote Australia are utilising digital technologies and new media. Through their rapid adaptation to and adoption of digital media technologies, young people are transforming their visibility by engaging in new forms of cultural production. Additionally, they are developing new multimodal communicative and participatory practices with an ever-expanding network of kin, peers and non-Indigenous contacts through social media.

Media anthropologists suggest that new media technologies are imposing 'new social relations' on contemporary society (Ginsburg et al. 2002:19). In this paper I discuss the nature of new social relations in the remote Indigenous context where exposure to media and information and communications technology (ICT) has been so recent. Furthermore, I explore what such changes mean in a society where the introduction of new media sits within a different socio-cultural context. I begin by situating the socio-historical context of altered social relations and communication styles in one Western Desert region. I look at the implications for youth media as cultural practice by tracing the way in which social relations and communication styles have altered across the generations. Lastly, I address how assumptions about how and where learning should take place are being challenged by new youth media practices, especially in situations where access to and control of digital technologies is leading to new forms of cultural production, multimodal communication and public participation.

In this account I draw on ethnographic research and my own observations of change over a number of decades to examine the connection between media technology, the generational divide, and the divide between in-school and out-of-school learning in remote Indigenous contexts where alphabetic literacy and media and communications technologies have so recently been introduced. I draw on a study of changing social practice and communication styles in the Western

Desert (Kral 2007, in press) and data from an Australian Research Council Linkage Project (2007–10). In the latter project a participatory or collaborative ethnographic research methodology was used to investigate the ways in which Indigenous youth are extending their learning and expanding their language and multimodal literacy practices through engaging with digital technologies and multimedia production. The research took place in media organisations, youth centres, library knowledge centres and arts projects in remote communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, all of which have tapped into digital media as a way of engaging young people in learning and meaningful, productive activity.[2]

Youth media research

The rapid development of new ICTs, an increase in affordable, small mobile technologies, and the penetration of the internet and mobile telephony over the past decade account for the explosion of new modes and channels for communication and multimedia production, all over the world. Internationally, such developments have led to substantial ethnographic inquiry into youth, digital media and changing communication practices.[3] Youth media cultural practices are commonly the focus of public discourse commentary, with writers suggesting that 'young people's use of digital media and communication technologies defines a generational identity distinct from that of their elders' (Ito et al. 2010:1). Ito et al. (2010:14) assert that new media represent a site 'where youth exhibit agency and an expertise that often exceeds that of their elders, resulting in intergenerational struggle over authority and control over learning and literacy'. Other research (Buckingham 2007) posits that new technology practices are tied to a 'digital divide' between 'in-school and out-of-school' use of new technologies and learning styles. Ito et al. (2010:1) argue that:

> Both the generational divide and the divide between in-school and out-of-school learning are part of a resilient set of questions about adult authority in the education and socialization of youth. The discourse of digital generations and digital youth posits that new media empower youth to challenge the social norms and educational agendas of their elders in unique ways.

Furthermore, they contend, 'technology, media, and public culture are shaping and being shaped by these struggles, as youth practice defines new terms of participation in a digital and networked media ecology' (Ito et al. 2010:14).

Researchers also suggest that digital technologies are enabling new kinds of agency in learning, allowing young people to take on the role of 'expert' and contiguously build up 'a sense of self as one who is knowledgeable' (Barron 2006: 198). This approach to learning intersects with a growing body of research in socio-cultural learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990) that looks to everyday social practice in out-of-school settings for models of learning and engagement (Barton et al. 2000; Gee 2004; Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Hull and Schultz 2002; Vadeboncoeur 2006) that differ from what is typically found in instructional locations such as schools or formal training. It also aligns with a growing literature that examines the relationship between online communication and changes to alphabetic reading and writing conventions (Crystal 2008) and language use in new media settings (Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). International studies (Hull 2003; Hull and Stornaiuolo 2010; Kress 2010; Soep 2006) suggest that fresh thinking about literacy has been ushered in by the arrival of digital technologies and the emergence of new social practices surrounding electronic media, digital film/photography and mobile phone technology. Other writers note that youth uptake of informal forms of writing in online contexts is part of a broader set of social and cultural shifts in the status of printed and written communication (Ito et al. 2010:11). This new approach is allowing us to reframe what is meant by literacy in a globalised world increasingly 'filled with digital artefacts and multiple modes and media available for communication across multiple sym-bolic systems' (Stornaiuolo et al. 2009:384). Significantly, an affordance of this change is the emergence of new forms of computer-mediated communication and the increasing prevalence of 'multimodal literacies' that draw on a variety of modalities, including speech, writing, image, gesture and sound (Hull and Nelson 2005).

Despite this growing literature on youth media, studies have generally been limited to industrial-ised nations (Coleman 2010) and accounts of digital media in academic and popular culture discourse rarely include Indigenous communities (Ginsburg 2008). Moreover, relatively little ethnographic information has been available on how young people in remote Indigenous Australia are shaping the creative, cultural and communicative uses of new media, and how and why these practices are taking hold in remote contexts.[4] I suggest that research on remote Indigenous Australian youth media occupies the borderland space between research in the burgeoning field of 'youth media' and what is termed 'Indigenous media anthropology' (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Wilson and Stewart 2008). Researchers in Indigenous media anthropology note how, until recently, Indigenous people were likely to have been objectified as the exotic 'Other' through media forms such as documentary or ethnographic film-making where the technology remained in the hands of the ethnographer. By the 1960s researchers were providing cameras for Indigenous people to record themselves (Michaels 1986; Turner 1992; Worth and Adair 1972). In remote Indigenous Australia the shift from being 'the object of other people's image-making practices' (Ginsburg 2008:139) to becoming the producers of media made by local people for a local audience came about in the mid-1980s, as discussed further below. Now in the digital age, not only is the recording technology in Indigenous hands, it is Indigenous youth who are increasingly the ones in control of the recording, the editing *and* the distribution modes and channels (Kral 2010).

Accounts in public or policy discourse tend not to portray the creativity and agentive participation of remote Indigenous Australian youth in new forms of cultural practice and production. Indigenous youth also remain relatively invisible or marginal to anthropological research in Australia. In the literature early ethnographies referred to children and adolescents only within classical life cycle descriptions. The classic texts remain Annette Hamilton's (1981) important study of child rearing in Arnhem Land and Victoria Burbank's (1988) account of female adolescence in an Aboriginal community. While some researchers have focused on the negative consequences of rapid socio-cultural change (Brady 1992; Robinson 1990; Senior and Chenhall 2008),

other ethnographers have explored the complex issues associated with changing youth socialisation (Fietz 2008), learning (Fogarty 2010) and intergenerational change (Eickelkamp 2011). Overall, however, ethnographic accounts of con-temporary youth cultural practice remain rare and few accounts privilege the youth voice. In fact, as Bucholtz (2002:526) asserts, ethnographic research on many aspects of youth cultural practice around the world is 'surprisingly scarce'[5] yet, Bucholtz continues, anthropology is 'well-situated' to offer an account of how youth in different socio-cultural contexts 'produce and negotiate cultural forms', as I seek to show in this account.

Changing social relations, changing communication styles: a remote case study

In the remote Western Desert region of Central Australia the transition from a nomadic hunter–gatherer existence to sedentary 'community' life came relatively late compared to most other parts of settled Australia. Prior to contact with Anglo-Australian society, Ngaanyatjarra, Ngaatjatjarra and Pitjantjatjara people had inhabited the Western Desert for thousands of years using a complex of multimodal communication forms and semiotic systems to convey meaning; through language, sign, gesture and gaze, special speech styles and registers, non-verbal communication and the iconic representations found in body painting, carved designs and sand drawings. In pre-contact times, in this nomadic desert society every individual was born into a collective web of social meaning where almost everyone was a known person, strangers were rarely encountered, and the norms of sociality and communicative interaction were kin-based (Brooks 2002; Dousset 1997). The internal trust of this small kin-based society was counterbalanced by the external distrust of *malikitja*; that is, 'strangers or persons from another place'. The authority of senior Law men was unquestioned and the emotional state *kurnta,* typically translated as 'shame', operated as a form of regulatory social control and constrained the way in which social action was organised (Myers 1986:125).

Unlike the circumstances in other regions, remoteness and the establishment of missions

(Warburton Ranges in 1934 and Ernabella in 1937) were to protect these desert people from the more profound ravages of the encounter with Anglo-Australian settler society. Accordingly, traditional social and cultural practices and discourse styles remained relatively intact until the 1960s. Nevertheless, the encounter with Anglo-Australian society drove an inexorable shift in the cultural patterning of interactions that has shaped a new range of 'sociocultural dispositions' (Ochs 1990:292), communication styles, and textually mediated roles and identities. The 1970s saw the inception of the federal Australian Labor Government policy of Indigenous self-determination, coupled with the national profiling of Indigenous identity through music, performance and media. Such changes seeped into remote Australia and were to dramatically alter the nature of Ngaanyatjarra sociality. In particular, new forms of 'publicness' emerged in response to the growing requirement for desert people to communicate with an expanding audience of strangers. By the 1980s, as anthropologist Fred Myers notes, desert people were thrust into new forms of engagement with people and institutions beyond their kin network, and this led to 'an expansion of the forms of community with which Aboriginal people felt they could identify' (Myers 2010:112).

Significantly, these new forms of social interaction impacted on discourse styles and communicative practices, often utilising textual, in addition to oral, conventions. In the 1970s for example, letters and petitions were sent to politicians seeking assistance for the establishment of new outstation communities in the newly formed Ngaanyatjarra Lands. This correspondence represented a new type of communication event: the text was composed not for an audience of known kin, but for *malikitja* or 'strangers'. This precipitated the use of the indirect register, typically used in utterances with persons where social distance and politeness is required. Again in the 1980s new socio-political circumstances introduced new speech events such as locally organised Christian meetings and community meetings to establish community-controlled councils. Such events ushered in a new rhetorical context and fostered a mode of public performance where individuals were compelled to overcome their disposition to *kurnta*. Western Desert people had to learn how

to employ 'straight talking' strategies that at first may have been a 'shock' or a linguistic transgression of the boundaries of normative social interaction where indirect speech was the preferred norm (Kral 2007).[6]

At this time communication was still based substantially on face-to-face interaction utilising a rich multimodal oral and gestural repertoire. However, by the mid-1980s communications and media technology had entered the remote domain. It was led by the launch of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), the inception of the national AUSSAT satellite system and the establishment of Warlpiri Media Association at Yuendumu, as documented by American anthropologist Eric Michaels (1986), and Ernabella Video and Television for the Pitjantjatjara and Ngaanyatjarra Media at Wingellina.[7] In 1987 the former Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) was implemented, representing a federal government response to the perceived threat to Indigenous languages and culture posed by AUSSAT. Through BRACS, equipment and training were provided for the production and broadcast of local community radio and video services for insertion over the incoming mainstream services now being beamed from AUSSAT (Deger 2006; Rennie and Featherstone 2008). At this time, media production reflected the worldview of the older generation and was tied to the reproduction and transmission of local language and culture (Featherstone 2011; Kral 2010). Youth media participation, evident in many communities today, has firm roots in this earlier era of radio and analogue video production, where media was used as a tool for cultural maintenance.

In Western Desert society it has only been two or three generations since the commencement of intense interactions with non-Indigenous society. Despite early positive experiences of schooling, adult Christian vernacular literacy and some vocational training, resistance to institutional forms of learning is now evident in poor school attendance, low retention rates and uneven levels of English literacy and numeracy (Kral in press). Over the intervening years the authority and regulatory capacity of the gerontocracy has waned, and the current youth generation has been socialised into a world where the generational divide is more profound than in most mainstream contexts. Unlike previous generations (which were more bounded by the parameters of ceremonial performance), with exposure to a greater range of Western 'performance' genres — sport, gospel bands, popular music, film, television, music videos — as observers and participants Western Desert youth are now 'performing' themselves differently from their elders. They are, for example, exhibiting greater ease in the public space by using non-traditional direct communication styles and overcoming their disposition to *kurnta* by putting themselves forward. *Kurnta* is still manifest in a tendency to avoid focusing on the individual person and a reluctance to stand out or step forward in the company of strangers, especially for the older generation (Brooks 2002). However, the manner in which this propensity organises cultural practice is changing — as exemplified in this advice from a Ngaanyatjarra father to his aspirant adolescent musician son: 'I used to be *kurnta* too, but you've got to concentrate. Just look at me and play and forget that everyone else is there.'[8]

The youth generation is now less 'shamed' when singled out. Young people are comfortable having their images or names enter the public space. Such transformations are evident in young people's media work and are validated by elders who need young people to mediate between old knowledge and new technologies. At the same time, older people's support for youth media practice is evident:

> The media has changed…it's growing like fire, it's gone big and we want to see it that way. And we're all working together to keep this media going so our next generation will take it on when we disappear from the Lands, we want to see media grow and go forward on and on. *Winnie Woods, Chairperson, Ngaanyatjarra Media* (IRCA 2010:2).

The profusion of digital images in the public domain is also leading to rapid changes in how the older generation moderates its prohibition of images of the deceased in films, digital community databases and funeral texts — contexts typically facilitated by media-savvy youth. As the mediators of new forms of cultural production, young people are simultaneously asserting control over how they are positioning themselves in the public space. Accordingly, new social

relations and networks of intimacy with an ever-widening network of 'strangers' are emerging. It can be asserted that young people's developing expertise and expanding ICT competence is defining a generational identity distinct from that of their elders, with new media representing a site where youths are exhibiting agency and a technological expertise that exceeds that of the older generation. Furthermore, new digital technologies are enabling new kinds of agency in learning, as explored further in the next section.

Youth media practice: access and control

Until recently the acquisition of Western knowledge was nominally ascribed to institutional learning processes. Learning outside kin-based structures has mostly been controlled by schools, a training provider or a workplace bounded by rules and controlled by non-Indigenous people. Furthermore, the control of media and communications technology has mostly been in the hands of media organisations or institutions. In the BRACS era media technology was expensive, sophisticated and large. Media practice required high levels of non-Indigenous assistance and input. The arrival of digital technology has ushered in new styles of engagement and learning that have enabled new forms of computer-mediated communication and multimedia cultural production outside institutional or instructional settings.

International research on youth media practice commonly locates the 'digital bedroom' as one of the most vibrant digital learning spaces for youth (Jones 2010; Livingstone 2002; Sefton-Green 2006). Here, adolescents in advanced industrialised economies can be found 'hanging out, messing around and geeking out' (Ito et al. 2010) with computers, alone or in friendship networks, in the privacy of bedrooms. In many remote Indigenous communities, access to computers or the internet at home is often not possible. Therefore, informal learning spaces such as media centres, youth centres, arts centres and libraries play a vital role as *communal* 'digital bedrooms' (Kral 2010), where youth can access digital media and communications technologies in the non-school hours.[9] These sites provide a pivotal social space where the focus is on communication and Indigenous youth 'are interacting on an equal basis with media professionals, without any power differential. It

engages all generations in technologically competent tasks of creative cultural production intended for use by the community' (IRCA 2010:67). Additionally, as mobile phones, digital cameras, mp3 players, iTouches and even laptop computers have become affordable, this has placed smaller mobile technologies in the hands of Indigenous youth — thus shifting the control of technology away from institutional locations and non-Indigenous authorities, and enabling greater access to resources and spaces for young people to independently initiate creative cultural production. In these locations young people are showing that they are fearless of technology and more competent at manipulating it than their elders. Even those with low levels of literacy are quickly able to grasp the intuitive problem-solving logic of digital cameras, mp3 players and computers and adapt this to other ICT environments.

In summary, through everyday social practice and access to new learning spaces, Indigenous youth are developing new skills, creating media, and increasingly taking on professional and leadership roles in their communities. Young people's adaptive learning strategies, evident in new media participation and production, reveal a tendency towards visual–spatial icon-based navigation, coupled with inde-pendent trial and error experimentation and peer teaching and learning processes. In informal learning spaces interest is leading to 'self-sustained learning' (Barron 2006) or 'voluntary specialised learning' (SB Heath, personal communication, 16 November 2010). In these spaces 'there is no right or wrong way' for learning or participation and everybody is 'set up to succeed' (IRCA 2010:67–8). Moreover, access to new media resources is allowing Indigenous youth to be the controllers of productive processes that generate unique resources and new forms of cultural production leading to agentive participation in public domains (Hull and Stornaiuolo 2010), as discussed in the next section.

The cultural nature of media production

Media researchers note that media forms, such as film and video, facilitate 'cultural mediation' and the reflexive process of interpreting oneself and one's culture (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Turner 1992). In remote Indigenous Australia a shift in the

presentation of self in the public space is evident in the clothes, language, gesture, visual symbolism *and* multimedia film and music production of the youth generation. With increased personal ownership of small media technologies and greater access to resources, many young people are producing and controlling new forms of cultural production such as multimedia, film and music production. Where young people have access to resources in arts projects, youth centres or media organisations, they are confidently using cameras, creating and capturing images, and directing their own films. They are using free editing software available in the Mac iLife suite of programs, such as iMovie, to manipulate the medium to create the stories that they want to tell, as well as music-recording software such as GarageBand to record the messages they want to convey. By gaining control of the technology, young people are able to manipulate the medium, the images and the messages by themselves, thereby gaining control over their own self-representation through exploring new forms of communication and participation.

Remote Indigenous youth are exposed to many more linguistic resources and modes and channels of communication than their predecessors. The multimodal nature of youth media productions and online communications is blurring the boundary between orality and literacy, so even those with minimal alphabetic literacy competence are adopting, and adapting to, new communication modes and channels with ease. The visual, creative nature of multimedia work illuminates the cultural practices and symbol structures in image and language that young people are using for identity formation. Openly displayed are the systems of cultural meaning that shape their interpretation of the world around them. At Lajamanu, Shane and Maxwell make films with old people on country, and work on documentaries for Aboriginal organisations, media organisations and the local Library Knowledge Centre. However, in their spare time they make films for fun so that they can learn more by 'mucking around' with camera techniques and editing on professional editing software such as Final Cut Pro. They film and edit dance and music videos with local musicians, produce DVDs, and upload them to YouTube or 'bluetooth' them between

mobile phones in the local community. As Shane says:

> I do media work because I enjoy it and I love editing. We have open access to the BRACS room, we use the equipment anytime we want. I like making people laugh, do a bit of dance videos, music videos for the Library Knowledge Centres or put them on YouTube.[10]

In the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, young people are engaging with new media technologies as film makers and musicians in arts projects, media centres and online. In their cultural productions they document contemporary youth practice, reflect on change and project pride in their linguistic and cultural heritage. Chris and Nathan, young Ngaanyatjarra/Pitjantjatjara musicians, talk of how they use songs to give a 'message'. In Chris' words, their songs give messages such as:

> Looking after our sacred areas and waterholes and grandfathers' land, that's a strong message, like so younger generation can see that and listen to that and understand what the message is. We have responsibility for, like, because we done all these things and we're doing, like, message and all that, singing and letting people know and like, getting the message out there.[11]

In summary, the recent introduction of digital technologies and new media into remote communities has radically altered forms and modes of cultural production for the youth generation. As Shane comments in an interview in 2009:

> The stories that we tell through the media is important because when old people pass away they leave something behind…Through the media we have a story to tell, we can show the outsiders what we do. The job is important because it keeps the history of Lajamanu. There's a connection between young and old, coming together, working, trying to keep Warlpiri strong by learning the history and passing it on to the next generation.[12]

Productions *by* youth rather than *about* youth provide insights into how young people are developing their own style, reflecting on their circumstances (both positive and negative) and,

commonly, expressing a humorous, joyful love of life. Here, young people are creating their own cultural forms and activities to interpret and respond to their positions; in this way cultural production can act as a 'form of empowerment' (Cammarota 2008:47).[13]

New 'practices of participation' in public domains

Youth media research indicates that new technologies are also enabling young people's agentive participation in global youth culture (Hull and Stornaiuolo 2010), whereby young people are exhibiting new 'practices of participation' (Ito et al. 2010:19) in public domains. Ito et al. (2010:10) propose that YouTube and Facebook represent 'participatory forms of media engagement' by providing an online forum for the youth voice (see also Soep 2006) and for the new positioning of self in the public domain. Identity formation experiences for youth are now highly self-reflexive and this is reinforced by the 'public styles' (Rampton 1999) that abound in media society.

The transformative aspect of new media is enabling Indigenous youths to distance themselves from localised social circumstances. In youth multimodal productions we are seeing deliberate and conscious linguistic switching or 'styling and crossing across social space and time' (Hill 1999:543; see also Alim et al. 2009). Through the incorporation of intercultural elements young people are gleaning what they want from myriad sources and making it their own through symbol system interpretation, manipulation and production. The affordances of new digital technologies are expanding the modes and channels by which they are extending their sociality and expanding their social networks in the 'cultural flow' between the local and the global (Appadurai 1996). As described above, the capacity for remote Indigenous youth to engage in public participation was previously limited by socio-spatial factors and early media production was predominantly for a local audience. Now young people are demonstrating their ability to move between social and physical spaces with ease: musicians are gaining status from having their music played at festivals and listened to on national radio or on

YouTube, and filmmakers are making a mark with wider viewings of films at festivals, on Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) and over the internet on YouTube and IndigiTUBE.

Social mobility in public places is being made possible not only by altered dispositions, but also by the affordances of the internet and online social networking. Despite a cultural predisposition to focus on local or parochial matters and to avoid 'shame', Indigenous youths are extending out from the local to the global through online 'friendship-driven networks' and 'interest-driven networks' (Ito et al. 2010:20) in a manner previously unimaginable. Facebook has gained popularity recently, principally because it operates as a highly visual form of localised, parochial and socially meaningful interaction. Concomitantly, social networking is also encouraging Indigenous youth to extend their sociality beyond kin and same-age peers to broader networks. The youth generation is demonstrating its ability to move effortlessly between social spaces and navigate its own 'mobility across social hierarchies' (Ginsburg et al. 2002:22). Furthermore, Facebook is leading to greater reflexivity in the youth generation, allowing young people not only to hyperlink with local, national and global issues as both viewers and participants (as alluded to in the introduction), but also to collaborate with academic researchers with ease.

Moreover, through participation in collaborative research, young people are reflecting on their own changing cultural practice and giving voice (mostly in English) to these reflections in interviews, academic publications and public symposia.[14] Speaking with me in June 2010, musician Chris concludes:

> From the research project we been doing we learnt like other things. Through this research we can see a more clear vision of things, like for the future and all that. And we can use different ideas…so that people can look at the ideas, and we can use it, make it useful. Like in the future there'll be a book and a DVD with ideas and all that so that people can look at it and use it, especially the young generation.

Shane and Maxwell at Lajamanu see that through media they can build bridges by connecting their

community to the world. They are also consciously tackling the issue of communication between mainstream Australia and remote communities, and dispelling misunderstandings, and they see technology and media as a way of doing that. As Maxwell told the audience at the Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance in Darwin in 2009:

> Come and listen to our stories. Spend some time to listen and we'll work together. We can show people of the world what Australia means. The problems that we really need to handle in this country is that people not really working together. We have an opportunity to tell the world using this media.

Conclusion

At present, policy and media discourse locks remote Indigenous youth into a discourse of failure. But how does this tally with the reality of their experience?

In this paper I have situated the acquisition of youth media practice as a social and cultural process within the dynamic of social change by focusing on aspects of changing modes of communication and performance within one socio-historical context in remote Indigenous Australia. I have focused on a group of young people who are not only participating in the production of new cultural forms using media, but also reflecting on what is going on for them. I have highlighted the manner in which they are deftly threading and weaving intercultural symbols, images and messages into their new cultural productions, revealing pride in their Indigenous cultural heritage. Simultaneously, I have shown that through new media, young people are taking up the challenge of global citizenry more than any other generation before them. In this way they are interpreting and responding to their positions with creative agency in a manner similar to youth in other international contexts (see Hull and Stornaiuolo 2010).

I have also shown that it is in the practice of cultural production in media that young people, rather than researchers, are recording what matters to them. Researchers such as anthropologists and linguists have traditionally controlled the instruments used to record cultural practice. Now the tables are being turned as a consequence

of young people knowing more about ICT than ever before. Accordingly, young people's capacity to document and reflect on their own practices and processes has been honed. In this way the ethnographic process can, in fact, be transformative by acting as a catalyst and enabling young people to begin a dialogue with researchers and others from outside their world, to stand outside their everyday context and develop their own meta-narrative, and to begin to participate in public domains and debates. This highlights the need for researchers to work directly with adolescents or young adults in remote contexts, and thus provide accounts that reflect the actual practices and perspectives of Indigenous youth. Such an approach reflects the international trend towards the development of collaborative approaches to youth research (Cammarota 2008; Jessor et al. 1996; Heath and Street 2008; McCarty and Wyman 2009) *and* research in minority Indigenous contexts (Fluehr-Lobban 2008; Henry et al. 2002; Smith 1999).

By taking young people and their cultural practices seriously and looking at what *is* happening, rather than what is *not* happening (Heath and Street 2008), the focus can be shifted away from a deficit perspective on youth learning and cultural practice, to highlighting the positive manner in which Indigenous youth are interpreting and responding to contemporary circumstances with creative agency. By affirming Indigenous youth practices and working alongside young people in a collaborative manner, insights can be gained into the capacity of youth, the meanings they attach to definitions of success, and their potential to recreate their social surroundings and future options. As summed up in the final word from Natalie, a Pitjantjatjara youth research collaborator:

> To me doing this research has changed a lot how I think about things. Now that I have shown the white people that I can do this and that. So that in the future if the community needs help I would know what to do, how to help them. So come and work with us and we'll show you what we can do. Working together as a team, like *ngapartji-ngapartji* and learning about each other for the future. We'll show you what we can do and how we want to do it. It's like a kick-start for all young people like us. It's really important for the younger generation, for how they are

gonna grow up and how they are gonna be: finding the balance *anangu* way and white-fella way.

NOTES

1. Rainstorms in the desert had generated a most strange phenomenon, as reported in the *Northern Territory News* (Bourchier 2010).
2. ARC Linkage Project (LP0774918), 'Lifespan learning and literacy for young adults in remote Indigenous communities', jointly funded by the Australian Research Council, The Australian National University and The Fred Hollows Foundation and based at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. Research was conducted between 2007 and 2010 at a range of sites: *Ngaanyatjarra Media*, at Wingellina, Western Australia; *Libraries and Knowledge Centres*, at Lajamanu and Ti Tree, Northern Territory; *Djilpin Arts* Aboriginal Corporation at Beswick (Wugularr), Northern Territory; *Youth Programs* at Yuendumu, Nyirripi, Willowra and Lajamanu, Northern Territory; *Ngapartji Ngapartji* inter-generational language and arts project in Alice Springs; and the *Alice Springs Public Library*.
3. See Hull 2003; Ito et. al. 2010; Soep 2006; Stornaiuolo et al 2009. See also Buckingham 2006; Livingstone 2002; Osgerby 2004; Sefton-Green 2006.
4. See Melinda Hinkson's account of youth and new media practices at Yuendumu (Hinkson 2005).
5. See also Hirschfeld 2002.
6. In Ngaanyatjarra, indirect speech — *tjitirrpa(pa) watjalku* or *kiti-kiti watjalku* (speaking to the side) — employs subtle, highly metaphorical features and is deployed when individuals stand in a constrained relationship yet are required to communicate with one another, obliquely by using indirect speech. It is also used to deal with conflict in public.
7. Other Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) include the Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA) and the Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM) and are now under the umbrella of the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) in Alice Springs.
8. Interview SG, Warburton, 2004.
9. Programs have included 'Deadly Mob', Out Bush and Gap Youth Centre, Alice Springs; CAAMA Youth Media project; Ngapartji Ngapartji inter-generational arts project, Alice Springs, Docker River and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands; Carclew Youth Arts APY Lands Project; Warburton Youth Arts Project, Ngaanyatjarra Lands, Western Australia; PAW Media and the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation, Yuendumu, Willowra, Nyirripi and Lajamanu; the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) youth programs, Papunya, Kintore and Docker River; and the Martu Media youth media project, Parnngurr, Western Australia.
10. Shane White, interview, Youth Learning Symposium DVD, September 2009.
11. Chris Reid, interview, Youth Learning Symposium DVD, September 2009.
12. Shane White, interview, Youth Learning Symposium DVD, September 2009.
13. Shane White and Maxwell Tasman are media workers at Lajamanu Community, Northern Territory. Chris Reid and Nathan Brown are musicians from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, Western Australia.
14. Including youth presentations at Annual Remote Media Festivals; Annual Bush Bands Bash, Alice Springs; The National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia: Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, Charles Darwin University, August 2009; Youth Learning Symposium, Darwin, September 2009; AIATSIS Symposium on Information Technology in Indi-

genous Communities, Canberra, July 2010; *Yiwarra Kutju* — Canning Stock Route Exhibition, National Museum, Canberra, 2010–11.

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