Charting a theoretical framework for examining Indigenous journalism culture

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Abstract

Indigenous media around the globe have expanded considerably in recent years, a process that has also led to an increase in the number of Indigenous news organisations. Yet, research into Indigenous news and journalism is still rare, with mostly individual case studies having been undertaken in different parts of the globe. Drawing on existing research gathered from a variety of global contexts, this paper theorises five main dimensions which can help us think about and empirically examine Indigenous journalism culture. They include: the *empowerment* role of Indigenous journalism; the ability to offer a *counter-narrative* to mainstream media reporting; journalism's role in *language revitalisation*; reporting through a *culturally appropriate* framework; and the *watchdog function* of Indigenous journalism. These dimensions are discussed in some detail, in an attempt to guide future studies into the structures, roles, practices and products of Indigenous journalism across the globe.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples across the globe have over the past two decades increasingly taken advantage of recent developments in media technologies, which have allowed them to counter mainstream perceptions and to speak to their own urban, regional and remote communities. This gives Indigenous media producers a much-improved opportunity to make Indigenous voices heard and to tell their own communities' stories. Increasingly, transnational movements have also emerged, with Indigenous media organisations working together to amplify their voices across the globe. One such example is the establishment of the World Indigenous Television Broadcasters' Network (WITBN) with member organisations in 11 countries.

The so-called "explosion" of Indigenous media (Alia, 2010: 7) has also led to a rise in scholarly examinations of their benefits, opportunities and challenges. Research output has amplified considerably in recent years, incorporating a variety of perspectives and theoretical approaches. The focus has been predominantly on media industries more broadly, but one important aspect has received comparatively less attention, in particular from a theoretical perspective. Indigenous news media and journalism play a crucial role in informing Indigenous societies of the world around them, yet Indigenous journalism's roles, context, challenges and opportunities remain somewhat underexplored. This is despite its undoubted importance in contributing to Indigenous public spheres, its role in empowering Indigenous communities and its potential in counteracting dominant negative stereotypes. A comprehensive analysis of the structures, practices and output of Indigenous journalism is therefore necessary, against the background of the specific political, economic, historical, social, linguistic and cultural contexts which affect the way Indigenous people conceptualise and practise news-making. This paper explores the existing literature on Indigenous

journalism and develops five main dimensions which can be seen as constitutive of Indigenous journalism, and which may prove a useful prism for future research in this field.

Background
Before embarking on an overview of Indigenous journalism, it is important to briefly resolve matters of terminology. The first relates to the use of the term Indigenous, while the second defines the concepts of journalism as well as what makes Indigenous journalism. The term Indigenous entered more common usage when it was adopted at the United Nations from the late 1970s, based on a push by Indigenous peoples for recognition at an international level. An often-cited working definition is the one adopted by the UN:

> Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. (Martínez Cobo, 1984)

The definition is somewhat contentious and often debated among anthropologists, and as Dahl (2012) points out, Indigenous peoples typically refer to themselves through their self-descriptions, such as, Maasai, Inuit, Haudenosaunee or Māori. This is important because local contexts can differ quite markedly in various Indigenous societies, leading Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 6) to note that "the term 'Indigenous' is problematic in that it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different." At the same time, many transnational movements have adopted the term 'Indigenous' to describe themselves, such as the World Indigenous Television Broadcasters Network mentioned earlier. I would therefore argue that it is appropriate to employ the term Indigenous when talking about Indigenous peoples across the world collectively, but to use self-descriptions when talking about specific Indigenous societies, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Māori, First Nations, Inuit or Sámi. At the same time, it is important to recognise that "even the self-identification of Indigeneity may be limited by the discourses, perceptions, and policies of the encompassing states and the refusal of certain states to accept the existence of any Indigenous peoples within them that use the terms politically steeped in opposing ideologies" (Wilson and Stewart, 2008: 13).

The term journalism in the context of Indigenous peoples is used here in a broad way that differs from Western traditions which tie it to notions of objectivity – a concept that in itself has not actually existed in Western journalism for very long (Schudson, 2003). Rather, this paper adopts Schudson's (2003: 11) definition of journalism as "the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance". Such a view attempts to avoid value judgments which may entrench journalism within a Western epistemology, allowing for other epistemologies, including Indigenous ones, to influence its practice (Waller, 2010). In fact, this paper is further grounded in the view that journalism is a cultural resource and is culturally contextualised. Indigenous journalism, then, is here defined as the *production and dissemination of information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance, by Indigenous peoples for the benefit of Indigenous but also non-Indigenous communities*. It acknowledges that Indigenous journalism is not necessarily the same in every Indigenous

community and will likely differ depending on specific political, economic and cultural circumstances, offering a multi-facetted view of different types of Indigenous journalism.

Viewed in this context, Indigenous journalism can be traced back to times which far precede colonisation. Ferreira (2006: 10), for example, traces practices of Latin American news-making and journalism to pre-Hispanic times, arguing that "Indigenous inscriptions with details of major social and political occurrences proliferated in urban centers of Classic Mesoamerica and beyond". In New Zealand, Stephens (2004: 107) has argued that the origins of Māori news and drama lie in the tradition of storytelling. In pre-European times, kaikōrero (traditional orators) were partly responsible for the delivery of news within communities. Such was their importance that they were "veritable storehouses of knowledge and information. They interpreted the world they knew and observed, for the benefit of their people" (Stephens, 2004: 107). Stephens argues that these traditions continue in Māori media of today.

The experience of having been colonised and marginalised has been an important aspect of Indigenous media more broadly, as technologies now offer "possibilities for 'talking back' to and through the categories that have been created to contain Indigenous people" (Ginsburg, 2002: 51). These are fundamental motivations of many Indigenous media, which are typically seen as "indispensable tools for promoting Indigenous identity, language, culture, self-representation and collective and human rights" (Wilson and Stewart, 2008: 18). Most importantly, Indigenous people are thus able to practice journalism, for example, within an Indigenous framework that employs Indigenous culture, epistemology and knowledge (Smith, 1999; Waller, 2010). In the age of the Internet and vastly improved access to information in many corners of the globe, the use and mobilisation of Indigenous media has become central at local, national and transnational levels (Wilson and Stewart, 2008).

The growth of such media has led to a variety of analyses of Indigenous people's media strategies in their attempt to break out of the stereotypical portrayal by the mainstream and to create a space where they can tell their own stories in their own ways (Alia, 2010; Browne, 1996; Ginsburg, 1995; Molnar & Meadows, 2001; Roth, 2006; Singer, 2001). While such approaches have invariably included analyses of Indigenous journalism, however, news-making has tended to be examined only as part of the broader media framework, rather than the prime focus of attention. I argue that such an analysis, which would include concepts from journalism and communication studies that are integrated with anthropological approaches (Bird, 2010a), may yield new insights into the way Indigenous societies across the globe are reporting on themselves and the world around them.

One notable aspect of the benefits of a journalism-centred approach is the fact that existing studies often take the development of Indigenous film-making as their departure point. This is perhaps not so surprising given that the dominant anthropological approaches have been mostly interested in broadcast media and film, and have tended to overlook newspapers (Hasty, 2006: 70). Yet, the history of Indigenous journalism dates back much further, providing for a longer timeframe of analysis of developments in Indigenous journalism. While pre-colonisation examples have already been mentioned, in terms of the modern era, the first tribal newspaper in the United States, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was established in February 1828 (Littlefield and Parins, 1984). Printed in English and the Cherokee language, and its main purpose was as a propaganda instrument for the Cherokee Nation, as well as a tool to accelerate literacy skills among the Indigenous population (Daniels, 2006). In Australia, the first newspaper produced by an Aboriginal organisation arrived merely eight years later, with the publication of the *The Aboriginal*, or *Flinders Island Chronicle* in 1838. While it only existed for one year, others emerged in the ensuing years (Meadows and Molnar, 2002). In New Zealand, the first Maori-language newspaper, *Ko te Karere o Nui Tireni* (The Messenger of New Zealand) was printed in 1842. This newspaper,

along with its successors over the next 20 years, was used by the colonial government for assimilationist purposes, however (Curnow, 2002: 18). Māori-owned and operated publications did not arrive until the 1860s.

As this brief review has shown, Indigenous journalism as defined here actually has a long history, predating colonisation. Expanding the timeframe of analysis thus enables a more holistic approach for analysis into its structures, practices and content. In the following, I will sketch out what I see as five dimensions that are emerging from the existing literature on Indigenous media and journalism, and which may prove fruitful for further empirical analysis.

Dimensions of Indigenous journalism

While journalism has often been only part of broader Indigenous media analyses, the existing literature still provides a number of starting points for theorising around dimensions of Indigenous journalism culture. The term journalism culture is here employed with reference to Hanitzsch's (2007: 369) definition as "a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful". The focus here is predominantly on Indigenous journalists who produce stories about issues of concern for Indigenous audiences. The attempt is to come up with dimensions that are generally present in various Indigenous journalism environments, both across countries or regions, as well as within them. Only empirical analyses will allow us to determine the extent of their presence as well as their relative importance for actual journalistic practice. It is assumed that individual Indigenous news media environments would display their own unique and complex mix of these dimensions.

The first dimension is about the *empowerment* of Indigenous societies. Indigenous news media have often served to provide a sense of empowerment for their people through "an alternative public space", as Sámi journalists have referred to it (Pietikäinen, 2008: 173). This space enables the discussion of Indigenous issues on Indigenous peoples' terms. Pietikäinen (2008: 177) argues that such media can "become symbols of empowerment and means for political mobilization of ethnic communities, mediating their public participation or helping in the reinterpretation of the notion and practices of citizenship". Indeed, early Sámi newspapers acted as spearheads for political movements. For example, *Sagai Muittalægje*, published between 1904 and 1911, was tied to a national movement of Sámi in Norway, which led to the Sámi politician Isak Saba being elected to parliament (Jernsletten, 1998).

Similarly, early tribal newspapers in North America were important instruments in the battle for self-determination, and aimed to reassert Indigenous rights (Avison and Meadows, 2000). In 1930s Australia, the newspaper *AboCall: the voice of Aborigines* was part of the 'advancement movement', and later newspapers in the 1950s were also committed to Aboriginal rights (Meadows and Molnar, 2002). Today, the *Koori Mail* refers to itself as the "Voice of Indigenous Australia" with a strong focus on Indigenous issues (Budarick and King, 2008). In New Zealand, *Te Hokioi o Niu Tireni e Rere atu na* (The Giant Haast Eagle of New Zealand who flies out) was founded by the Waikato tribe in 1862 and used to advocate for the Māori King Movement and the restriction of government influence over Māori (Curnow, 2002: 21). It was followed by many others which would exhibit a fiercly pro-Māori stance and agitate for Māori rights. One relevant example here is *Te Hokioi's* adoption of the European terminology of white and black to differentiate between Europeans and Māori, but using them in opposite contexts, ascribing a preference to black. In this way, Māori "rejected the paternalistic Pakeha [European] message, by proclaiming, what we might now call a black consciousness and asserting pride in their *kiri mangu* [black skin]" (Paterson, 2002: 93).

Subsequent news media have continued these traditions in many parts of the globe. In a major study of the media of the Mapuche in Chile, Salazar (2003, 2004), for example, notes how Indigenous media are a critical form of making politics. Further evidence exists in Taiwan, where the newspaper *Indigenous Voice Post's* primary goal was "for the aboriginal people to abandon their subaltern role and to learning how to control the presentation of news topics by themselves" (Tsai and Chang, 2012: 2).

A second dimension is what we can call the desire to provide a *counter-narrative*. As discussed previously, Indigenous peoples have used media technologies to 'talk back', or even 'shoot back' when referring to visual media (Prins, 2004). This has been no less the case for Indigenous journalism, spurred on by the overwhelming evidence that mainstream reporting of Indigenous issues across the globe is regularly stereotypical (see, for example, Abel, 1997; McCallum and Holland, 2010; Pietikäinen, 2003). Alia (2010: 110) has argued that "throughout history, Indigenous media projects have often begun in 'illegal,' 'outlaw,' 'guerilla,' 'rebel,' or 'pirate' ways". Grixti (2011: 343) notes that "perhaps the most widespread understanding of Indigenous media productions is that they are the work of activists who use Western media technologies in order to counter dominant media misrepresentations of Indigenous people by documenting Indigenous cultural traditions from an Indigenous perspective, and in the process articulate Indigenous cultural identities and futures."

The distinction between these first two dimensions is that the first relates to professional views and practices aimed at empowering communities by contributing to battles of self-determination. That is, the focus and motivation come from within. The second dimension, meanwhile, is aimed at changing external perceptions imposed by mainstream journalism, and to provide a different narrative about Indigenous peoples from the prevailing one. While this may not have been the case for every news media outlet, the motivation to provide a counter-narrative again goes back a long way. Daniels (2006: 322) notes that Native American newspapers have "always existed, in part, to right the wrongs done by mainstream media, who some say were insensitive or downright incorrect in their portrayals of Native Americans". Perkins' (2003) interviews with Native American newspaper editors have shown that most see a need for their publications to portray their communities in a positive light. Veteran Māori journalist Derek Fox, who pioneered Māori news on New Zealand television in the 1980s, has argued that mainstream journalism has shown no willingness to report accurately on Indigenous issues, and it is therefore up to Māori to fill the gap in news coverage. At the same time, Fox (1992: 173) is aware of the pitfalls of developing "a false positive image or deliberately stating we broadcast only good news. Something in me rails up against that. But the media don't have to do that. All they have to do is their job. The positive aspects are there waiting to be reported."

Another core reason for many Indigenous media outlets' existence is the desire to assist in the maintenance of Indigenous languages. A third dimension of Indigenous journalism thus needs to relate to its *language revitalisation* function. Colonial policies have in many contexts led to a severe decline in the number of native speakers, and media are seen as vital resources to help arrest this decline (Browne, 2005). In New Zealand, Māori Television screens a number of television shows aimed at teaching the Māori language, and the entire Māori broadcasting sector owes its existence to a Waitangi Tribunal ruling that the Māori language is a tāonga (treasured possession) that needs to be protected by the government (Middleton, 2010). Fox (1993) has argued that "broadcasting has an enormous responsibility in the recovery of a language it has helped to push towards extinction." In Australia, where the large variety of Aboriginal languages has made any national approach more difficult, some Aboriginal newspapers nevertheless served as part of language renaissance movements in the late 1970s (Meadows and Molnar, 2002). Today, however,

newspapers like the *Koori Mail* or *National Indigenous Times*, as well as news bulletins on NITV, publish predominantly in the English language.

Pietikäinen's (2008: 183) study of Sámi journalists found that one of their essential tasks was to "contribute to language revitalization processes taking place in various domains of Sámi society … The linguistic importance of Sámi media was unanimously recognized among the journalists interviewed." Surveys with journalists in 10 European minority-language communities – Basque, Catalan, Galician, Corsican, Breton, Frisian, Irish, Welsh, Scottish-Galic, and Sámi – have also found that more than two-thirds of them "understand professional journalism as an activity in which they incorporate a function of language backing, either at the support or advocacy levels" (Zabaleta et al., 2010: 204). Following glasnost and perestroika in Russia, many Indigenous groups in places such as Siberia and the Lake Baikal region established their own news media revitalize their languages (Diatchkova, 2008; Graber, 2012).

There is also a role for Indigenous journalism to play in cultural revival more broadly. While language is undoubtedly an important part of culture, I would distinguish here between journalism's role in language-backing, and what I see as a fourth dimension of Indigenous journalism culture – the desire to practice journalism in a *culturally appropriate* environment. This dimension encompasses more than just the need to revitalise culture in reporting *about* culture. That is of course an important component in itself, as demonstrated by Māori Television's mission statement of wanting to "make a significant contribution to the revitalisation of tikanga Māori (Māori values and customs) and reo Māori (Māori language) by being an independent, secure and successful Māori Television broadcaster" (Māori Television, 2012). In northern Finland, Sámi journalists named four topics of particular importance: Traditional livelihoods, cultural issues, land-owning rights and issues of Indigenous people (Pietikäinen, 2008). There is no doubt that the focus on reporting about Indigenous issues will relate to cultural issues and practices, which are important in order to ensure cultural survival.

Yet, in the context of journalism, this dimension is even more so about being true to Indigenous culture throughout the reporting process. If we accept that journalism is an inherently cultural process, it makes sense that journalism would be practised differently in various cultural contexts, and, as some evidence from mainstream journalism suggests, that it is more in line with local cultural values (Hanusch, 2008). As Bird (2010b: 13) suggests, "journalism emerges from and responds to cultural specificities", and Pietikäinen (2008: 177) has pointed out that, through their own media Indigenous journalists are able to "practise culturally typical ways of communication, to recognize experiences, perspectives and topics often disregarded by other media." This is important as it allows the fusion of journalism with Indigenous knowledge, culture and practice that has been advocated by advocates of the use of Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies (Connell, 2007; Smith, 1999; Waller, 2010).

For example, early Māori newspapers adopted the names of birds, which were regarded as the traditional winged messengers, demonstrating an early adaptation of news into Māori culture (McRae, 2002). Stuart (2002: 44) notes that Māori and European news cultures are "so different that Māori approaches are nearly impossible to reconcile with western cultural approaches to 'news'." Examples are news writing styles and journalists' conduct around news sources – in particular elders – and tribal meetings. A 1993 study found that the Māori news program Mana News gave more airtime to sources than any other program, put less emphasis on conflict and offered solutions in so-called bad news stories (Te Awa, 1996). Such aspects are in line with Māori culture and customs, especially, which note that everyone is entitled to be heard. Journalists working at Native American newspapers have also invoked cultural values in their reporting of the natural environment. Here, "native interpretations of legal disputes, political differences, historical events, and economic

decisions are driven by a clear sense of place, which, for Native Americans, embodies identity and culture" (Loew & Mella, 2005: 132).

The fifth dimension relates to what is in the West often seen as one of journalism's most important roles: the *watchdog function*. As noted in Fox's (1992) uneasiness about broadcasting only good news, there is an inherent conflict in some of the roles discussed so far. Quite often Indigenous news media's raison d'être has been to advocate for Indigenous causes and provide a counter-narrative. Such role descriptions are seen as problematic by some mainstream Western journalists – often those in Anglo-Saxon societies – who may see objectivity and watchdog journalism as utmost important and therefore reject advocacy of any kind. This is despite the notion of objectivity in journalism having emerged only in the late twentieth century (Schudson, 2003) and the fact there are many other types of journalism in Western societies today which follow an advocacy function.

Nevertheless, many Indigenous journalists believe they have a role to play in watching over their leaders to the benefit of their wider community – even if this often presents a number of difficulties. In North America, tribal journalists – those employed by news media owned by tribal authorities – see their first obligation to the people. They quite regularly experience enormous pressures from the tribal owners but have a strong commitment to the truth, and their rhetorical sovereignty is rooted in the people. "Those who act in the best interests of the people are those who more likely have the authority to represent those people" (Kemper, 2010: 36). As Kemper (2010: 7) points out, "native journalists are native *and* journalists, regardless of the order in which you put the words. From their writings, it appears it would be unthinkable to most of them to do anything that would undermine the Indigenous people they serve" (emphasis in original). Native American journalist Paul DeMain (2001) emphasises that being an advocate for his people does not mean he cannot also be a watchdog. In fact, he regards himself as both a "guerrilla" and a "legitimate" journalist, a hint that what some Western journalists may see as irreconcilable ideas may not be so in Indigenous contexts. In Scandinavia, this also rings true, with the news director at Norwegian Sámi radio quoted as saying: "Of course we are independent of Sámediggi (Sámi parliament). We maintain a critical point of view. We can't be the fan club for Sámediggi" (Buljo in Alia, 2010: 133). Indigenous Maltese journalists have found a way to deal with their conflicting allegiances: They simply declare any biases to their audiences (Sammut, 2007).

Conclusion

As Indigenous news media across many parts of the globe are expanding, it becomes increasingly important to examine the contribution they are making to the Indigenous public sphere. Yet, a comprehensive approach to the concept of Indigenous journalism has been missing from scholarly discourse thus far. This article's aim was to provide what is hoped to be a first step towards theorising around dimensions of Indigenous journalism culture.

I have argued that we can discern five dimensions from the existing literature: The first two relate to Indigenous journalism's role in providing a sense of empowerment as well as in presenting a counter-narrative to mainstream journalism's portrayal of Indigenous affairs. In addition, Indigenous journalism plays an important role in wider efforts of language revitalisation. It also has a role to play in cultural survival, and one way that is done is by reporting through culturally appropriate frameworks. Finally, Indigenous journalism also often performs a watchdog role for communities. As the evidence has shown, these dimensions appear to be present in a variety of Indigenous journalism contexts across the globe, offering opportunities for comparative research. Each Indigenous news context is bound to be characterised by its own unique mix of the dimensions, and the challenge lies in documenting differences and similarities in the various influences which affect them, be they

of political, economic, historical, social, linguistic or cultural nature. The dimensions are also often related and therefore should be seen as distinct, but not mutually exclusive. For example, Grixti (2011) has noted the interplay between language, cultural identity and political activism in aspects of Māori journalism.

As well as cross-national comparison, studies would need to take account of the complex Indigenous journalism environments within countries. In a number of countries, Indigenous journalism is practiced in mainstream news organisations, in semi- or wholly autonomous Indigenous units within mainstream organisations, as well as in Indigenous-controlled organisations. The longest-running Māori news program, for example, is produced through the Māori and Pacific Programmes department at Television New Zealand. In addition, news is also produced at Māori Television, which is controlled by Māori management. It is important to bear in mind these complexities and differentiation when studying Indigenous journalism.

Finally, the list of dimensions presented here is not geared towards an essentialist portrayal of Indigenous journalism. The dimensions are merely based on an extensive perusal of the literature, and my interpretations of this existing work. They are to serve as an early theoretical prism for studies that want to analyse Indigenous journalism. There may well be more dimensions which emerge through further empirical research. This paper should thus be seen as merely the start of a journey, rather than its end.

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