

Centre for the Advancement of
Indigenous Knowledges

Closing the Gap and the Aboriginal media ecology in New South Wales



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
1.1 Acknowledgement	1
2 Glossary of key terms	2
3 Introduction	3
4 National partnership and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap	5
4.1 Implementing Closing the Gap in NSW	6
4.2 What the National Agreement means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations	7
4.3 What the National Agreement means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media	7
5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media ecology	9
5.1 Aboriginal audiences and media engagement in NSW	11
5.2 Research on Aboriginal community-controlled media	13
5.3 The policy context: past and present	13
5.4 Infrastructure, training and capacity-building needs	20
5.5 Self-determination and empowerment	20
5.6 Wellbeing, language and culture	21
5.7 Racism and representation	21
5.8 Training, employment and economies	22
5.9 Digital inclusion and access	23
5.10 Social media and content creation	24
5.11 COVID-19, trust and emergencies	24
6 Implications and conclusion	25
7 References	28

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1 Glossary of key terms

- **ATSIC** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The now-abolished Commission was responsible for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services between 1990 and 2005, and had a regional democratic governance structure. It was responsible for distributing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting funding over this time.
- **BRACS** – Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme. In 1987, BRACS provided local Aboriginal community broadcasting capacity for mainstream radio and television services, predominantly in remote areas. BRACS is now known as RIBS.
- **Coalition of Peaks** – The national level coalition of peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that are party to the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Coalition of Peaks represents over 70 peak organisations.
- **CAPO NSW** – Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations NSW (CAPO NSW). The NSW state-based coalition of peak Aboriginal organisations works with the NSW Government on Closing the Gap and other key policies.
- **COAG** – Council of Australian Governments. COAG was the peak inter-governmental forum bringing together state, territory and federal governments to negotiate reforms and policies of national significance until 2020. COAG was involved in initiating Closing the Gap.
- **FNMA** – First Nations Media Australia. The peak body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander non-profit media organisations in Australia.
- **IAS** – Indigenous Advancement Strategy. In 2015, the Australian government announced it would rationalise funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services, and distribute via five key streams. The IAS is now managed by NIAA.
- **NIAA** – The National Indigenous Australians Agency is an Australian Government agency that sits within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It is responsible for some policy development, program design and service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific programs.
- **NITV** – National Indigenous Television has been broadcasting nationally since 2007. It is an independent Aboriginal-controlled news and media service that now broadcasts as part of SBS (the Special Broadcasting Service).
- **RIMOs** – Remote Indigenous Media Organisations are clusters of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media organisations.
- **RIBS** – Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services. RIBS are the bases of equipment used to provide local broadcasting in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

2 Introduction

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (hereafter National Agreement) recognises the important role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, including community-controlled media (hereafter Aboriginal community-controlled media), in providing services, creating economic opportunities, fostering wellbeing and self-determination, and combatting racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This paper discusses the significance of the new National Agreement for strengthening and supporting Aboriginal community-controlled media, and improving government communications with Aboriginal people, with a specific focus on NSW. To inform that discussion, it provides a review of policy developments and debates in this space in recent decades, and an overview of the Aboriginal community-controlled media ecology in Australia and NSW. It summarises key insights from existing scholarship and learnings from government commissioned research and evaluation on the benefits and affordances of Aboriginal community-controlled media, and considers what further knowledge and research is needed to facilitate and support the role of Aboriginal community-controlled media, and support government communication strategies with Aboriginal communities to meet the expanded set of Closing the Gap targets.

This paper addresses these issues by first explaining how the Agreement was reached, and the significant role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in its implementation. It explores how this partnership emerged and what it could mean after a series of difficult changes in the policy space for community-controlled organisations since the 1990s. It then explores the possible implications of the National Agreement for Aboriginal media nationally and more specifically in NSW, and provides in-depth look at what is currently known about the size and reach of the Aboriginal media ecology in NSW. It explores how the Aboriginal media ecology nationally has been shaped through policy innovation and then neglect from the 1970s to today, and what this has meant in NSW. Via a thorough review of existing literature including the long history of government reviews and reports, and a significant scholarly literature, it explores: key issues for developing the Aboriginal media sector in NSW including infrastructure, training and capacity-building needs; the links between a strong sector and self-determination; the possibilities for language and cultural creativity and maintenance through Aboriginal media; the significant issues of racism in mainstream media and how Aboriginal media responds to it; the possibilities of employment and training opportunities through sector expansion; issues of digital inclusion and the expansion of multi-platform and social media; and the role of Aboriginal media in emergencies such as fires, floods and the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are several key takeaways:

- 1) The new National Agreement provides significant potential for the growth and support of Aboriginal community-controlled media.
- 2) Aboriginal community-controlled media operates in a policy vacuum and with significant resource constraints that must be addressed for this potential to be realised (especially in NSW, where the sector is notably small).
- 3) Since a period of initial expansion, Aboriginal community-controlled media has dealt with a complex and inexact architecture of legislation, regulation, funding and governance.
- 4) Research broadly demonstrates that Aboriginal community-controlled media provides trusted, culturally appropriate, locally grounded news and information, and sensitive and valued representation of Aboriginal peoples and their stories.

- 5) Aboriginal community-controlled media has significant potential to facilitate Aboriginal cultural and language survival and renewal, and Aboriginal employment, and to promote messages that facilitate health, wellbeing, trust, engaged citizenship and self-determination, and combat racism and discrimination in ways that broadly contribute to all identified outcomes of Closing the Gap.
- 6) Aboriginal community-controlled media policy and funding has not kept up with shift towards multi-platform content creation and sharing in the digital era.
- 7) Further research is needed to understand the Aboriginal media ecology in NSW, understand engagement and trust patterns of Aboriginal audiences in NSW, and to scope potential for capacity-building for Aboriginal community-controlled media in NSW.

3 National partnership and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

For the first time, the July 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap has recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives as parties to the National Agreement through the Coalition of Peaks (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020). The new emphasis on partnership reflects broader changes happening across Australia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy. Policy frameworks such as *OCHRE* in NSW, and treaty discussions in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria, and Tasmania, as well as the debate over the shape and possibility of a national Voice, have all emphasised co-design, shared decision-making, and support for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (Dreise et al., 2021; Langton & Calma, 2021; Norman, Hunt, et al., 2021).

The National Agreement represents a new chapter in the complicated lineage of Closing the Gap (Dillon, 2021). In 2005, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission called for a strategy to address the gulf between the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2005). Following this, the National Indigenous Health Equality campaign formed, and was later rebadged as Close the Gap in 2007. An annual Close the Gap day helped to propel national reform (Gardiner-Garden, 2013). In March 2008 the Australian Government signed a Statement of Intent organised by Close the Gap advocates (Thomas, 2020). Then, in November 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set six 'Closing the Gap' targets, focused on improving outcomes in child mortality, early childhood education, life expectancy, year 12 attainment, literacy and numeracy skills, and employment (Dillon, 2021).

Closing the Gap as a policy focus has cemented statistical in/equality as a measure of advancement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy, while also committing government to regular reporting on these measures (Thomas, 2020). Reporting has sometimes produced a sense of policy failure as 'gaps' failed to close (Bond & Singh, 2020). Critics argue that Closing the Gap has pathologised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, promoted deficit perspectives, ignored or problematised cultural differences, and failed to develop strategies to counter the systemic disadvantage underpinning inequalities (Altman et al., 2018; Fforde et al., 2013). By 2015, COAG decided that the policy needed a 'refresh' (Dreise et al., 2021). In 2018, amidst the refresh process, a group of national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations wrote to the Australian Government, insisting that any redesign must involve genuine partnership and decision-making with community-controlled peak bodies. This advocacy together with media pressure produced a meeting with Prime Minister Scott Morrison and then the approval of the partnership through COAG (Coalition of Peaks, 2021).

The national Coalition of Peaks brings together 51 peak organisations from across Australia, and it now acts as an important decision-making body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Closing the Gap (Coalition of Peaks, 2021). The Coalition of Peaks and the Australian Government signed the first stage of the new National Agreement in July 2020, which focuses on 17 targets emphasising a strengths-based approach and focusing on health, education, employment, housing, justice, child protection, family violence, social and emotional wellbeing,

lands and waters, languages, and shared decision-making (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020).

The National Agreement (2020) emphasises four priority reform areas:

- Priority Reform One: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making
- Priority Reform Two: Building the community-controlled sector
- Priority Reform Three: Transforming government organisations
- Priority Reform Four: Shared access to data and information at a regional level

The Productivity Commission has been tasked with tracking the National Agreement's targets (Coalition of Peaks, 2021). The states and territories have also signed the National Agreement, and state-based Coalition of Peak organisations have been established.

Both the Australian Government and the Coalition of Peaks have promoted the process as a new way of doing business with the potential to overcome the failures of past government policy frameworks (Dreise et al., 2021). Former Prime Minister Scott Morrison referred to Closing the Gap as the 'shared responsibility' of government and Aboriginal organisations (Grattan, 2020). As Francis Markham and Bhiemie Williamson (2020) noted, many targets are broad and means of data collection to support reporting on their progress have not yet been developed. The deficit metrics embedded in Closing the Gap strategies remains a major concern. Patrick Sullivan (2016) argued that deficit metrics promote racism by focusing on Indigenous 'failure' and generate demoralisation and defeatism. Chelsea Watego et al. (2019) warn that 'any new strategy will fail unless it addresses the power imbalances and racism that characterises the current approach to Indigenous policymaking as a whole.'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, community members, policy-makers and researchers will be paying close attention to how the implementation of the National Agreement unfolds, and whether the process can move past the problems of a deficit focus, live up to promises of transforming government agencies, increasing support and capacity-building for community-controlled organisations (including media) and building productive partnerships between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (Markham & Williamson, 2020). The National Agreement's implementation will be tested at the state and territory level.

3.1 Implementing Closing the Gap in NSW

In the aftermath of the National Agreement, states and territories worked to formulate Implementation Plans. Under the National Agreement, states and territories are required to report regularly on all outcomes, including annual reporting on their work to develop a strong community-controlled sector. In NSW, Aboriginal Affairs NSW is the key state government agency tasked with developing the Implementation Plan, primarily in collaboration with the state-based NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations. In NSW, the Implementation Plan was released in June 2021. In addition to the four priority reform areas in the National Agreement, the NSW Plan includes an additional priority: 'Employment, business growth and economic prosperity' (NSW Government, 2021).

3.2 What the National Agreement means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations

The commitment to Aboriginal community-controlled media in the Agreement flows from the recognition that community-controlled organisations ‘achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services’ (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020, p. 8, Clause 43). The National Agreement commits to strengthening the workforce, developing capital infrastructure, developing service provision, and supporting or improving the governance of the community-controlled sector (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020). This is especially significant as it emerges after over two decades of ‘mainstreaming’ policy that marginalised community-controlled organisations in policy design and service delivery (Page, 2018). After the Howard Government’s abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2004-5, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program funding shifted to multiple agencies, with no specific preference for funding and grants to be allocated to community-controlled organisations (Sanders, 2018a). When an audit recommended significant cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spending in 2014, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott rationalised spending through the introduction of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), which provided funding in five key streams. Since then, this has been responsible for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific program funding. The IAS was administered by one agency, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) (Sanders, 2018b). The IAS has allocated the bulk of its funding to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander run organisations since its inception (Page, 2018, p. 89). Currently, IAS funding is distributed through the Australian Government’s National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) which was established in 2019 and is part of the (DPMC). The IAS now predominantly manages funding for Aboriginal community-controlled media through its Culture and Capability Programme (Dreise et al., 2021).

After the fragility of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in recent years, the National Agreement has the potential to generate a period of stability and growth. At the time of writing, however, this remains an opportunity rather than a realised achievement. Significant new funding arrangements and agreements are yet to be announced. In the October 2020 budget, the Australian Government provided a small investment of \$46.5 million for the capacity-building of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (Haughton, 2020). There are expectations that the community-controlled sector will be a focus of future funding, however (Dillon, 2021).

3.3 What the National Agreement means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media

The National Agreement has significant ramifications for Aboriginal community-controlled media. As part of the overarching commitment to prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the National Agreement states that Aboriginal community-controlled media will have a ‘central role in communicating activities under this National Agreement to allow culturally relevant messages to be developed and shared’ (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020, p. 5, Clause 24). The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media is part of Outcome 16, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing’, which aims to increase the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken, and Outcome 17, ‘People have access to

information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives', which aims for equal levels of digital inclusion by 2026 (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020).

The National Agreement explores the need for data development surrounding these outcomes. This includes the need for measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages used in media and supporting the Australian Digital Inclusion Index and other measures of digital inclusion. Specifically Outcome 17 also notes the need for data on the number of Aboriginal media and community-controlled media organisations, the need to measure audience growth on associated platforms, the need for data on sources of news content among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, data on the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the media, data on the type and diversity of content broadcast, and numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in mainstream media (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020). Data collection will need to be ongoing to measure progress over the ten year span of the National Agreement. As discussed below, there is a small amount of instructive data and research that speaks to the benefits of Aboriginal community-controlled media for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, there is a need for significant data and research development to assess the success of Outcomes outlined in the National Agreement, and to promote policy and resourcing to strengthen Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media ecology

The Aboriginal community-controlled media sector is both part of the wider sector of Aboriginal community organisations, and a part of the broader media landscape. There are over 8,000 community-run or based organisations across Australia which often play both a service delivery role, and a representational and advocacy role, across fields including but not limited to health, land rights and native title, law and justice, education, and media (Norman, Apolonio, et al., 2021). The sector grew extensively through the 1970s and 1980s, as a response to the ineffective and often racist treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by mainstream services and organisations, and sometimes connected to legislative requirements to enable access to other specific rights and services via incorporated associations and Land Councils (Curchin & Rowse, 2020). While some organisations are part of national networks and linked to peak bodies at state, territory and national levels, others are unique and respond to specific needs of a community or locale (Norman, Apolonio, et al., 2021).

Aboriginal community-controlled media traces its roots back to the early twentieth century. Many of the radio organisations operating today were founded in a period of expansion over the 1980s and 1990s (Meadows, 2016). An overview of national and NSW-based Aboriginal media organisations is provided in the below table.

Table 1: National and NSW-based Aboriginal media sector

National Aboriginal-controlled media	NSW-based or accessible Aboriginal-controlled media	Names/titles and locations of NSW-based Aboriginal-controlled media
1 national newspaper	1 newspaper	<i>The Koori Mail</i> , Lismore
28 regional and urban radio broadcasting services	4 radio broadcasting services and 1 online radio broadcaster	2CUZ (Bourke), Wilcannia River Radio (Wilcannia), Koori Radio (Redfern), Ngarralinyi (Taree) and OneMobRadio (online, Coffs Harbour)
8 remote media organisations servicing 138 remote communities	0	0
1 national radio news service (NIRS) ¹	1	1 (based in Brisbane)
1 public television broadcaster (NITV)	1 (NITV)	NITV (Artarmon, Sydney)
3 community TV broadcasters	1	Indigenous Community Television (based in Alice Springs)
1 commercial TV service (Imparja)	0	0
4 online media platforms	4	IndigiTube, ICTV Play, IndigenousX and NITV online

The sector includes local community broadcasting services (initially encompassing both television and radio, now predominantly radio, and largely remote), print media, multi-platform media (such as NITV, which produces television, radio and digital news and media), and online

¹ NIRS operates a national program from Brisbane, using content from Brisbane-based Indigenous radio station 4AAA as well as numerous Aboriginal-controlled radio stations around the country. See Dreher & de Souza (2022).

media platforms and creative businesses. The significant Aboriginal screen industry (discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper) also intersects with Aboriginal media through content creation and collaboration. As discussed later, policy and funding for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media sector has failed to keep up with digital 'convergence' (Featherstone, 2015). Media-making today involves multi-platform communications which encompass traditional television, print and radio genres together with a digital focus across video, audio, social media, mobile applications and other online services.

While radio stations and community television broadcasting organisations are part of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, some other Aboriginal media operates with different degrees and types of Aboriginal control and governance. NITV is an Aboriginal-controlled public multiplatform news and media service with a significant national reach and a larger budget than all the community broadcasters combined. *The Koori Mail* was an initiative of five local Bundjalung Aboriginal organisations and is privately owned, and OneMob radio, based in Coffs Harbour, is also an initiative of community organisations. Another newspaper, *Tracker*, which ran from 2011-2014 was funded by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council. There are also businesses including digital and creative consultancies, and new media organisations such as IndigenousX and Awesome Black. There are also a variety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run or focused programs on community and public radio such as *Speaking Out* and *Away!* on the ABC and Koori Survival Show on Radio Skid Row, and NITV programs on SBS Radio stations (Dreher & de Souza, 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander journalists also hold positions across the mainstream news organisations. The Judith Neilsen Institute funds Indigenous-identified positions at Fairfax Nine and provides grants for IndigenousX, while the Balnaves Foundation assists in funding *The Guardian's* Indigenous reporting (Nolan et al., 2020).

As explained in more detail below, a lack of financial and institutional support and lack of policy clarity has prevented the expansion of Aboriginal community-controlled media. Today, there are over 860 remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia without access to Indigenous broadcasting (Featherstone, 2015). There are also rural and urban Aboriginal communities without access to Indigenous broadcasting. For example, Dubbo, which houses NSW's largest rural Aboriginal population, and other large Aboriginal population centres in the Central Coast and Newcastle, Tamworth, Wagga Wagga and Wollongong, do not have access to a local Aboriginal-controlled TV or radio broadcasting service (First Nations Media Australia, 2022).

First Nations Media Australia (FNMA) is the peak body representing not-for-profit Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting (radio and television organisations), media (print, digital and cross-platform organisations) and communications (such as creative agencies) across Australia. FNMA is part of the national Coalition of Peaks. At a state and territory level, however, there is no specific representation for media as part of the state and territory peak organisations. FNMA emerged as the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA), primarily supporting remote broadcasting, and evolved into a national body, reflected by a name change, in 2016-2017 (First Nations Media Australia, 2022). Since their formation, FNMA has been central to advocacy, calling for increased support for community-controlled media and political reform. FNMA's involvement in the Closing the Gap partnership process was central to securing Outcome 17 and to securing a Joint Communications Strategy focused on Aboriginal-community controlled media as the key bodies to communicate Closing the Gap messages (Claire Stuchbery, pers. comm). FNMA argue that Aboriginal media provide a 'strengths-based' approach to Closing the Gap (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

4.1 Aboriginal audiences and media engagement in NSW

Understanding the NSW Aboriginal population is crucial to understanding the influence and reach of Aboriginal community-controlled media. NSW has a fast-growing Aboriginal population, estimated at 265,685 in 2016, which is 3.4 per cent of the total NSW population. The median age is 22 years, compared with 38 years for the non-Aboriginal population. The majority—46.3 per cent—live in major cities. However, the Aboriginal population tends to be more rural and remote than the non-Aboriginal population overall, with 34.5 per cent in inner regional areas, 15.5 per cent in outer regional areas, 2.8 per cent in remote, and 0.9 per cent in very remote areas. Disadvantage tends to increase with remoteness, and those outside major cities lack access to a full range of social services (Biddle et al., 2018). Yet despite the large Aboriginal population in NSW, the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector is small in the state. There is limited data on the audience of, and engagement with, Aboriginal community-controlled media in NSW (community radio listenership is not included in commercial ratings) (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). However, as explained below, even the limited data available suggests keen engagement by Aboriginal audiences with the Aboriginal-controlled media available.

In order to better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media consumption, in 2014 the national Department of Finance Communications Advice Branch collected primary data around how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sought government information and services. Their large research team interviewed 1,018 people face-to-face around Australia—but did not survey people in remote locations. The survey was weighted against the 2011 Census to align the sample with categories around age, gender and remoteness.

Relevant key findings on national Aboriginal media consumption were (Australian Government, 2014):

- 17 per cent of respondents struggled to communicate in English
- 13 per cent of respondents indicated they understand ‘more than some words in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language’
- 91 per cent of respondents watched free-to-air television (76% for Seven, 75% for Nine, 59% for Ten, 59% for ABC, 41% for SBS One, 35% for 7Mate and 54% for Go)
- 67 per cent of respondents had watched at least one Indigenous station or program on television in the previous four weeks
- 73 per cent listened to radio
- 40 per cent responded (unprompted) that they listened to Indigenous and/or community radio stations
- 31 per cent of respondents had listened to Indigenous radio stations or programs in the previous four weeks
- 77 per cent indicated they had read a newspaper in the previous four weeks
- 63 per cent had read metropolitan newspapers in the previous four weeks
- 48 per cent had read the *Koori Mail* in the previous four weeks
- 19 per cent had read *Deadly Vibe* and 13 per cent had read *Tracker* in the previous four weeks²

The results suggested strong variation of key information sources dependent on the government service being provided, divided into four categories: health services and programs;

² *Deadly Vibe* was a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander magazine funded by the Australian Government, discontinued in 2014 after funding cuts. *Tracker* was a news and analysis-focused Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander magazine funded by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council between 2011-14 (see Meadows, 2016).

income tax; income support and family assistance payments; and Indigenous programs and services. The results also indicated that participants preferred a multi-channel method of communication, with television most popular for awareness raising and the internet and written and face-to-face communication for more detailed information (Australian Government, 2014). Primary sources for information on income tax was the Australian Taxation Office, and Centrelink for income support and family assistance, as may be expected. However, with other services, there was a strong reliance on family, friends, community networks and the 'bush telegraph'.

Researchers concluded that using both commercial and Aboriginal-controlled media for government communications would be optimal, that government strategies should be tailored to the place and audience, and should provide both oral and written advice. The survey data is now nearly a decade old and the significant changes in communication and the use of social media applications and services since the survey was undertaken suggest the need for a new national survey on Indigenous media and communications access and habits. Notably, the survey did not ask direct questions about Aboriginal community-controlled media, nor which media sources consumed were more trustworthy, or whether respondents preferred Aboriginal controlled-media or would like to see it expanded (Australian Government, 2014). The survey did not collect data on digital inclusion. This limits its insights into audience preferences and access.

Another national, face-to-face survey of around 500 Indigenous people in 2016, conducted by McNair Ingenuity and FNMA focused on the reasons that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access Aboriginal community-controlled media. They surveyed people door-to-door in regions covered by Regional Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs), which are all based across northern and central Australia. The survey findings suggest broad engagement with the unique services of Aboriginal community-controlled media in the NT context. Further research is needed to explore whether the reasons for engagement are similar in contexts such as NSW.

The survey found that 91 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in these regions listened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media at least once a month, for reasons including:

- 'to hear about my own people' (65 per cent)
- 'for positive stories on Indigenous people' (79 per cent)
- 'for the Indigenous focus in programs and news' (54 per cent)
- 'to hear my own language' (56 per cent)
- 'for health information' (48 per cent)

Crucially, the research also found that the local community radio station was the preferred source of government information (for 35 per cent of respondents). Most respondents watched commercial television channels (89 per cent) alongside Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) (91 per cent) and NITV (84 per cent).

A key source of information on levels of digital inclusion in Australia is the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII). The ADII provides a national sample, but does not disaggregate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To partially address this, an ADII report in 2019 provided remote location case studies in Ali Curung (NT) and Pormpuraaw (Queensland). The case studies showed that digital exclusion is worse in remote areas and that there is a heavy reliance on mobile connectivity. However, the studies also found great digital adaptivity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2021).

There are other sources of data that have not been analysed here as they are unavailable at the time of writing. Private data (available for purchase) from Roy Morgan shows consumption patterns over the previous seven days broken up by the NSW total population, the NSW metro Aboriginal population, and the NSW regional Aboriginal population. It also includes data on the type of internet connection.³ The Digital News Report 2022 provides data on digital news consumption, but does not specify audience type. In 2016, Census data measured the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households across Australia with access to the internet. In the 2021 Census this question was removed. Analysis of Census data shows that digital inclusion was greater in metropolitan areas. Data from the 2016 Census could be aggregated to create maps—based on a variety of Census regions—showing these proportions and identifying digitally excluded regions.

4.2 Research on Aboriginal community-controlled media

Since the 1980s, a small body of anthropological research has explored the emergence of remote community-controlled media and its relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and community social interactions (Deger, 2006; Ginsburg, 1995; Michaels, 1994). Some of this research employed participatory action research models, where researchers engaged in the process of setting up broadcasting services and explored their uses for the protection and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expression. In addition, media scholars have mapped representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through measuring content and through discourse analysis (e.g. Jakubowicz, 1994; McCallum & Waller, 2017b; Thomas et al., 2020). In the 2010s, scholarly work tended to focus on the uptake of new communication technologies and their capacity for empowerment and identity and affirmation (Carlson et al., 2018; Kral & Schwab, 2016; Nolan et al., 2020). There is also a wealth of documentation emerging in the policy, evaluation, and review space since the 1980s. Through this combined literature, canvassed below, it is possible to trace the contours of policy development and funding shifts for Aboriginal community-controlled media, and to map understandings and views on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in media.

4.3 The policy context: past and present

Largely, the focus of policy discussion on Aboriginal community-controlled media over the last four decades has been broadcasting and more recently, the convergence of broadcasting and digital media (Featherstone, 2015). That means that print media is often missing from the discussion. However, some broad historical literature canvasses the emergence of print media and its links to Aboriginal self-determination. The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run newspapers stretches back to the *The Abo Call*, the newspaper of the Aborigines Progressive Association edited by Jack Patten. It ran from 1937-38 and publicised issues such as access to education and healthcare, and the historic Day of Mourning protest in 1938 (Meadows & Molnar, 2002). In the 1970s, Aboriginal-run print media grew exponentially along with the Aboriginal community-controlled sector more broadly, and community newsletters, Land Council newsletters, school newsletters and numerous publications, such as the newspaper *Identity*, spread information and encouraged political engagement literacy (Meadows & Molnar,

³ See <http://www.roymorgan.com/industries/media>

2002). The *Koori Mail* revitalised this tradition with their launch of an independent national newspaper in 1991 (Rose, 1995). There is evidence that Indigenous broadcasting stretches back to radio connecting the Torres Strait Islands in the 1930s (Meadows & Molnar, 2002). The better-known history of Aboriginal radio broadcasting began in Alice Springs with CAAMA Radio in 1980, after Aboriginal community radio programs ran on stations in Adelaide and Hobart through the 1970s (Gardiner-Garden, 2003).

The expansion of today's Aboriginal community-controlled media sector began in earnest after the 1984 *Out of a Silent Land* report made a series of recommendations. These recommendations produced the policy settings surrounding the expansion of Aboriginal-controlled radio and television broadcasting via the AUSSAT satellite between 1985 and 1987 (Willmot, 1984). This was a period of momentum, innovation and expansion; by 1987, local radio and television were broadcasting in 81 communities (Batty & Glynn, 1998). The national Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) was established to enable local and community broadcasting over mainstream radio and television services, providing remote communities access to these services for the first time ever (Batty & Glynn, 1998). The BRACS program gave substantial control to communities. Local broadcasters had the ability to place their own material on mainstream signals. It provided standard equipment—but no training, administrative support, or infrastructure (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). Across Northern Australia, this evolved into 'hub-and-spoke' model, where larger Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations (RIMOs) provided infrastructure, support and training for smaller, remote broadcasters. This was also the model used to expand ICTV (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). Today, BRACS has now become Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service (RIBS). However, a policy focus on remote areas meant that rural and urban Aboriginal populations largely missed out. There was a lack of dedicated 'spectrum' for Aboriginal media in these more crowded radio markets. This means that many major regional centres and urban centres are without access to local Aboriginal-controlled media today (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander radio services are available to approximately 47% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population today (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

Since this period of expansion, Aboriginal community-controlled media has dealt with a complex and inexact architecture of legislation, regulation, funding and governance. The Australian Government, rather than state and territory governments, has been responsible for the sector since its inception until today. As Table 2 shows, repeated reports and inquiries have highlighted government failure to appreciate the sector's potential to facilitate health, wellbeing, trust, engaged citizenship and self-determination, and to combat racism and discrimination.

Table 2: National reports, reviews and inquiries on Aboriginal community-controlled media

Year	National report, review or inquiry	Commissioning group and author	Key recommendations	Legacy
1984	Out of the Silent Land: Report of the Task Force in Aboriginal and Islander Broadcasting and Communications	Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing access to community broadcasting via satellite radio and television for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under community control, particularly in remote areas Using resources of ABC to support Aboriginal community-controlled media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mass expansion of sector with focus on remote areas in Northern Australia (NT, Queensland, WA, SA)

Year	National report, review or inquiry	Commissioning group and author	Key recommendations	Legacy
1989	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Broadcasting Review	Sue Paton, Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for Indigenous broadcasting sector separate from community radio Creation of specific licenses for Aboriginal community radio separate to other community radio licenses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommendations opposed by the Department of Transport and Communications, Aboriginal-community controlled broadcasting remained part of community media sector
1991	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody	Governor-General on behalf of the Australian Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouraged support and funding for Aboriginal community-controlled media to support empowerment of Aboriginal perspectives and to challenge racist representations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created momentum to fund NITV
1991	Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The report included research by Professor Andrew Jakubowicz which revealed widespread negative reporting on Aboriginal people in the mainstream media that associated them with crime and violence. It noted that Aboriginal media provided a mechanism for community viewpoints to be heard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created momentum to fund NITV
1991	Discussion paper on Indigenous broadcasting policy	Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Commonwealth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for Aboriginal community-controlled media to promote its social functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This report was largely ignored
1992	Evaluation of broadcasting and communications sub-program	ATSIC Office of Evaluation and Audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on interviews with ATSIC regional staff, the review recommended a national policy and co-ordination of funding specific for Aboriginal community-controlled media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of ATSIC's policy on broadcasting
1993	ATSIC Broadcasting policy review and report and draft policy statement	Neil Turner, ATSIC Infrastructure Branch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A draft policy framework focused on equity, cultural restoration, preservation and growth, efficiency of communication, employment and self-image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This policy informed ATSIC's work in the space until ATSIC was abolished
1998	National report on Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme	Neil Turner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Series of recommendations to make licensing easier, provide funding, facilitate better management and provide training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This report was largely ignored

Year	National report, review or inquiry	Commissioning group and author	Key recommendations	Legacy
1999	Digital Dreaming: a national review of Indigenous media and communications	Indigenous Management Australia, ATSIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommended a new policy approach for Aboriginal community-controlled media arguing for investment in long-term sustainability and infrastructure, more strategic planning, developing business and marketing plans, bringing together content, delivery and service, encouraging government departments to utilise and work with Aboriginal community-controlled media, and promoting economic development and jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This report was largely ignored, and the issues of infrastructure and digital and platform convergence have become more serious
2000	Broadcasting Inquiry Report	Productivity Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledged the importance of Indigenous broadcasting within the broader Australian policy environment and as a primary service for indigenous communities Recommended to look into the feasibility of establishing a national Indigenous broadcasting service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This led to ATSIC and NIMAA setting up a working group and the publication of 'The Belonging Network report' which outlined options of a National Indigenous Broadcasting Service (progress stopped by abolition of ATSIC)
2005	Indigenous Television Inquiry	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recommended a National Indigenous Television service be established with all stakeholders working together under a single organisational structure and content aggregation model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal government provided \$48.5million over 4 years for the establishment of a National Indigenous Television service (however, no dedicated platform was allocated resulting in NITV replacing the existing ICTV satellite service); NITV began broadcasting on in July 2007
2006	Indigenous broadcasting program review	Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While noting that funding had stagnated since the 1990s, the review recommended funding for radio only and for all video and TV production funding to go to NITV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No increase in Indigenous Broadcasting Program funding despite growth in number of Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations.

Year	National report, review or inquiry	Commissioning group and author	Key recommendations	Legacy
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A lost opportunity for sector to be developed and recognised as a multi-media multi-platform delivery model with rise of digital and online media
2009	Review of National Indigenous Television	Hugh Watson Consultancy, Department of Environment and the Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noted major achievements of NITV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legitimised continuing funding of NITV
2010	Review of the Australian Government investment in the Indigenous broadcasting and media sector	Neville Stevens, Chairperson, Office of the Arts, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Argued that the sector was particularly well-suited to assist in Closing the Gap Made 39 recommendations focused on improved administration, new licensing arrangements, encouraging government to work with Aboriginal community-controlled media, employment and training opportunities and preparing for changing technologies and social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This report was largely ignored, though resulted in the Indigenous Broadcasting Program being relocated to the Department of Broadband, Communications and Digital Economy and the relocation of NITV to SBS
2014	Report of the review of operational partnerships in the remote Indigenous broadcasting sector	Hugh Watson Consultancy, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal report recommending hub-and-spoke model be used for broadcasting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub-and-spoke model continued
2017	More than radio – a community asset: Social return on investment analyses of Indigenous Broadcasting Services	Social Ventures Australia for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showed that \$2.87 per \$1 spent was returned in cultural, social and economic value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This report was largely ignored
2021	Renewing a vital Indigenous voice and community asset – the Indigenous broadcasting and media sector	National Indigenous Australians Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key focus on how Aboriginal-run media can contribute to Closing the Gap and the Indigenous Voice co-design process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be determined

The place of Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting within government funding structures and within a broader broadcasting policy architecture has shifted and changed in complex ways since the 1980s. This has limited the ability of Aboriginal community-controlled media to strengthen and expand. To start with, funding and regulation of Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting was administered through the Indigenous Broadcasting Program, controlled through the Australian Government's Department of Transport and Communications (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). The 1989 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting review from the Australian Government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs recommended an Aboriginal-controlled broadcasting sector be formally established, with increased resourcing (Paton, 1989). This would have made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting separate from the broader community radio sector and provide greater funding opportunities in recognition of its importance. However, this was never adopted (Paton, 1989).

Upon its establishment, ATSIC became the primary organisation for distributing funding for Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, unknown). In 1993, ATSIC established a broadcasting policy which identified and emphasised the potential of Aboriginal-community controlled media to exchange essential information with audiences concerning healthcare, education, child welfare, domestic violence, and to assist in community-led strategies to address social issues and problems that they identified (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1993). There has been no official national or state policy on Aboriginal-controlled media since the abolition of ATSIC in 2005 (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). After this, Aboriginal-controlled broadcasting funding was controlled by an array of departments: the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA), then the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, and then the Department of Communications (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008).

The Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting sector became part of the community radio sector formally with the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992), which remains in force (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a; Gardiner-Garden, 2003). This has meant that Aboriginal-controlled radio stations compete with community radio stations for radio licenses ('spectrum'), and in major cities and rural towns this competition effectively excludes them from the market (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). Community broadcasting is also limited to non-profit status and can attain only local coverage (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). Further, sponsorship messages can only take up five-minutes per hour in community radio and television broadcasting (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

At the turn of the century, media researcher and historian of Aboriginal community-controlled media Michael Meadows (2000, p. 4) argued there was a lack of clarity over the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector's role within government, a lack of training and expertise to develop programs in communities, and lack of understanding within government about remote media's potential to 'become true communication centres, tapping into services such as education and health.' Meadows (2000, p. 6) proposed a permanent, named fund to develop regional media hubs and allow the development of Aboriginal community-controlled media as 'an important and unique cultural resource.'

Ten years later, the Stevens review (2010) noted the sector's continued success in reaching Aboriginal audiences and creating meaningful employment and cultural expression. The review concluded that Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasters were 'staffed by passionate and committed people' and 'provided significant benefits to local communities', giving them an 'important role to play in national agendas such as Closing the Gap.' The review argued that 'a well-articulated and forward-looking strategy' for Aboriginal community-controlled media could provide dividends in Aboriginal wellbeing (Stevens, 2010).

However, since the 1990s, funding for Aboriginal community-controlled media has been in effective decline. The 2006 Indigenous Broadcasting Program review argued to reduce the funding for Aboriginal community-controlled broadcasting to radio only. All television and video funding were to be channelled into the newly-founded NITV (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). The tension between a national, professionalised approach embodied in NITV and a locally-driven approach linked to local and regional governance and self-determination was initially a source of dissatisfaction (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). This was partly resolved by the relaunch of ICTV in 2013 and its digital expansion (Featherstone, 2015).

Throughout the 2010s, government financial support for Aboriginal community-controlled media remained stagnant. Between 1998-2018, funding for Indigenous broadcasting stayed at around \$15 million per annum with no increase; cost increases due to inflation have not been covered in the last decade (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). As noted earlier, currently the NIAA, via the IAS, is now responsible for funding Indigenous media organisations through the Culture and Capability Programme. The shift to IAS funding took Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media away from the broadcasting space and back into the Indigenous affairs space, but without any concomitant recognition of its specific role and nature (First Nations Media Australia, 2022). Since 2016, NIAA has provided around \$21 million per year for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media (First Nations Media Australia, 2022).

In 2021, Hugh Watson Consulting completed a review of the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector for the IAS, with a focus on how it could contribute to the Voice to Parliament, Closing the Gap and policy co-design processes. The review notes that the sector provides: 'channels for communication, education and motivation'; a platform for all levels of news and community information; facilitation of visits by government; the sharing of emergency updates and information such as surrounding COVID-19; the sharing of relevant local stories and opportunities; educational content; entertainment that fosters wellbeing and self-image; a way to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music and sport; connection and social opportunities; and a historical record of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives, languages and achievements. The review also notes a variety of instances in rural and remote areas where Aboriginal-controlled media organisations have facilitated community meetings and consultations with government effectively, arguing they are well-placed to do this as trusted sources of information. It argues that the sector could play an important role in co-designing the Indigenous Voice to parliament (Hugh Watson Consulting, 2021).

Hugh Watson Consulting (2021, p.37) also suggest that the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector can play a key role in Closing the Gap by:

- delivering content and access to historical and contemporary Indigenous programming that reflects and enhances cultural identity and expression
- contributing a positive sense of identity and healthy outcomes
- helping to maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages, particularly in remote and regional Australia
- providing opportunities for economic development for Indigenous Australians
- providing a range of training and employment pathways for Indigenous Australians within the sector that enhance employment opportunities in mainstream media and other industries

The following sections explore further key themes from the literature on both the benefits of Aboriginal community-controlled media and some of the needs of the sector to realise its potential.

4.4 Infrastructure, training and capacity-building needs

Underfunding means that Aboriginal community-controlled media requires significant upgrades and new funding to meet the demands of the digital era and reach its potential to contribute to Closing the Gap outcomes. In a unique attempt to measure the 'value' of Aboriginal community-controlled media, a report by Social Ventures Australia (2017, pp. 7–8) uses economic modelling to contend that for every single dollar spent on Aboriginal community-controlled media, it returns \$2.87 in 'cultural, social and economic value.' Yet they argue a 'minimum resourcing threshold' allowing commercialisation opportunities is rarely met and suggest that significant investment in infrastructure would return dividends.

In their 2022-23 pre-budget submission, FNMA call for an overall budget of \$31.58 million dollars per annum on top of the current \$21 million provided by the IAS. Noting the obligations placed on Aboriginal community-controlled media through the National Agreement and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they request specific funding for infrastructure, COVID-19 support, strengthening news services, expanding local media services and training and development opportunities, and funds for content production, digital archiving, recruitment and retention, business development and to address indexation pressure (First Nations Media Australia, 2022).

4.5 Self-determination and empowerment

Globally, Indigenous media is seen as a key component in self-determination efforts. Article 16 of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) declares the right of Indigenous groups to 'establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous (sic) media without discrimination'. Research demonstrates how Aboriginal community-controlled media fosters self-determination and community cohesion. The Social Ventures Australia (2017, p. 6) More than Radio study found that Aboriginal controlled media not only 'execute their core business' of sharing 'information, news, interviews, music, community events and stories' but also 'create culturally rich environments' that help build community cohesion and resilience. The study concludes that Aboriginal-controlled media 'contributed to the government's IAS objectives'.

Over 2017-2021, the Listening In project sought to understand how community media, including Aboriginal-controlled media, promotes understanding of Aboriginal self-determination and encourages 'Indigenous and community media voices' to be heard in 'key institutions of the mainstream public sphere' (Dreher & de Souza, 2022, pp. 4–13). Its authors contend that Aboriginal community-controlled media promotes 'a voice on one's own terms,' giving communities space to set the agenda, determine the audience and determine the frames of debate and representation—largely through 'issues-focused' and in-depth content (Dreher & de Souza, 2022). Another major study explores how media reporting impacts on policy outcomes (McCallum & Waller, 2017a). The study found that negative media coverage impacts how 'policies are developed, communicated and implemented,' but that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations increasingly utilise media strategies to influence and disrupt

policy debate, often through Aboriginal community-controlled media (McCallum & Waller, 2017a).

4.6 Wellbeing, language and culture

Since the 1980s, researchers have grappled with how Aboriginal community-controlled media can act as 'strategic cultural management'—taking a tool of government and turning it into one that benefits communities' own interests (Featherstone, 2015). Concerns about the spread of broadcasting and its consequences for cultural and linguistic ecologies in remote areas produced great Aboriginal engagement, with the expansion of broadcasting to ensure Aboriginal control of cultural reproduction in their communities (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). Much like other Aboriginal-run health, legal and educational services established through the 1970s and 1980s, Aboriginal-run media is closely tied to aspirations of self-determination and moves to protect and renew Aboriginal languages and cultures (Featherstone, 2015). Coming out of organisations such as the Warlpiri Media Association was the idea of 'fighting fire with fire', that is, responding to the perceived threat of assimilation through the spread of media by embracing and remodelling it to suit Aboriginal cultural and political aspirations (Michaels, 1986).

4.7 Racism and representation

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and 1992 Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence both recommend a focus on developing the Aboriginal community-controlled media to encourage positive Aboriginal community-controlled representation to challenge negative stereotypes and challenge violence against Aboriginal peoples. Research bears out both the bias of mainstream media and the unique approach of Aboriginal community-controlled media in representing Aboriginal peoples (Rennie & Featherstone, 2008). The 2020 Reconciliation Barometer found that 46 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe media coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 'usually negative', though this has fallen from 57 per cent in 2016 (Reconciliation Australia, 2020).

A wealth of scholarship shows how racist assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been promulgated in media, producing and reproducing distorted narratives (McCallum et al., 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are often silenced in discussions that directly affect them. In turn, this has implications in how policy discourses and practices are developed (Fforde et al., 2013; McCallum & Waller, 2017b). As Archie Thomas et al. (2020) have shown, mainstream media often fails to understand and adequately describe Aboriginal political aspirations, often speaking from a presumed white standpoint and repeating negative discourses and narratives that constrain public understanding. They argue that in contrast, Aboriginal community-controlled media consistently engages carefully and sensitively with Aboriginal stories. A study examining the death of Daniel Yock in custody found that mainstream media relied on elite sources such as police and others in the legal profession, whereas the *Koori Mail* coverage highlighted Aboriginal voices (Forde & Anderson, 2015). Here, researchers found that the 'everyday routines and processes of alternative journalism' create space for Aboriginal worldviews (Forde & Anderson, 2015, p. 45). In contrast, the anti-racism organisation All Together Now found that even 'positive' representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian mainstream media over 2018-2020 regularly 'marginalised Indigenous voices' and prioritised 'non-Indigenous perspectives on Indigenous issues' (Iacoban et al., 2021, p. 6).

Tanja Dreher (2010, pp. 91–100) argues that racialised communities working to change mainstream media institutions often come to feel as if it is merely a process of learning ‘the many ways in which their perspectives and priorities simply do not count as newsworthy’. It can also be a process of realisation that professional journalists are unlikely to ‘make an explicit public commitment to change’ and that mainstream media success often reproduces ‘conventional news values of dominant discourse(s)’ (2010, pp. 95). This is what Dreher calls a failure of listening, ‘an active exercise of the privilege not to hear’ (2010, pp. 100).

More difficult, but potentially more rewarding, are processes of ‘talking back’ in ways that are not limited by the mainstream media’s constraints in hearing Indigenous stories. Warlpiri journalist Rachael Hocking (in Iacoban et al., 2021, pp. 4-5) argues that ‘Black media ethics’ prioritises ‘culturally appropriate and empowering coverage of our communities’ and repositions Aboriginal peoples as experts and knowledge holders. Aboriginal media producers work from Aboriginal standpoints, which ‘recognise Indigenous community needs, value Indigenous truths and prioritise Indigenous voices’ (Burrows, 2018, pp. 1121). Aboriginal community-controlled media also acts as a cultural bridge, providing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences with knowledge and connection to Aboriginal peoples and their concerns, and an opportunity to listen in (Dreher, 2009; van Vuuren & Meadows, 1998).

FNMA has drawn particular attention to the lack of funding for news provided to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters, meaning that Aboriginal-led reporting on Aboriginal issues remains rare outside NITV, the *Koori Mail* and the National Indigenous Radio Service (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). This raises concerns about the ability of media to hold governments accountable. At the same time, FNMA have raised concerns that the distribution of funding through the IAS could tie Aboriginal-community controlled media to Aboriginal affairs policies and priorities generated by the government. This is because the sector relies of regular grants and specific programs funded by government, and the independence of this media is not guaranteed. This has some potential to create tension between funding obligations and the media’s role as the ‘fourth estate’ designed to keep governments accountable (Featherstone, 2015). FNMA argues that the integrity of media must be protected and its independence guaranteed (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). This means recognising and valuing Aboriginal community-controlled media as a legitimate place to speak back to government, and not solely as a service delivery vehicle (Dreher & de Souza, 2022).

4.8 Training, employment and economies

Over 2018-2019, the Aboriginal community controlled media sector employed approximately 600 people with 80 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (First Nations Media Australia, 2019b). Aboriginal and Torres Strait media practitioners have often argued that the sector is the crucial training ground for Indigenous journalists and content creators who go on to work in mass media organisations and influence the wider public discourse on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights (Burrows, 2018). It also provides more general training and skills in communications and technology rarely otherwise available (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

Social Ventures Australia (2017) explore three Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations, including the Gadigal Information Service that runs Redfern’s Koori Radio. They find that all three media organisations create meaningful employment and participation, and contribute to strengthened culture and community. The process of bringing community together

via media fostered cultural and political aspirations. However, without investment in infrastructure and staffing, the possibilities of this are greatly reduced.

FNMA (2021) also argues that there is scope for greater commercialisation and job creation in the industry. As noted above, the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 and the associated definitions of community media put constraints on Aboriginal community-controlled media. Commercialisation has proven difficult in these circumstances. Further, because the markets served by Aboriginal-controlled media are small and tend to be low income, this can increase production costs while decreasing the opportunity for advertising income. This results in reliance on government funding. Low levels of government funding for Aboriginal community-controlled media, and a lack of infrastructure funding in turn, further reduce the potential of expansion to generate new income (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). FNMA (2019a) advocates for government investment through directly contracting Aboriginal community-controlled media to run information campaigns, community events and training programs. Currently, third party organisations are largely responsible for contracting Aboriginal community-controlled media for government messaging, which limits the share of funds going directly to Indigenous-run organisations (Stuchbery et al., 2022).

4.9 Digital inclusion and access

While funding and policy surrounding Aboriginal community-controlled media has continued to focus on radio broadcasting, digital media has come to dominate media consumption in Australia. Increasingly, media producers are expected to be multi-platform producers and to engage in online content sharing and platform creation as well as through web sites, social media and podcasting (Featherstone, 2015). Aboriginal community-controlled media are producing mobile content including on-demand media and social media content, apps, games and more—but are not regularly or specifically funded to do so (Carlson & Dreher, 2018). ICT has been treated as a category for discrete project-based funding, but the sector has lobbied for ongoing funding to provide for multi-platform media services and digital literacy programs (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap has also placed renewed focus on strategies for digital inclusion. A Telstra-funded RMIT study is now aiming to measure levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander digital inclusion across remote Australia, which will provide greater knowledge about use of digital technology and internet services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in these regions (Australian Digital Inclusion Index, 2021). One of their ten case study sites is in Wilcannia, NSW. As researcher Daniel Featherstone (2015) notes, increasing digital inclusion also requires building understanding of a range of connected issues including ‘affordability, ICT [Information, Communication and Technology] access, lack of skills or experience, low English literacy, lack of relevant applications or content’, as well as a cultural protocols around sharing images and information.

However, FNMA remain concerned that Closing the Gap Target 17 is focused on increasing digital inclusion as a mechanism to deliver government information, rather than on how the message is delivered and whether it is culturally relevant and considered. They argue that the content of the messaging and the trustworthiness of information is just as important for digital inclusion as broad questions of access and affordability (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a).

4.10 Social media and content creation

With the development of new and often more affordable media technologies and the spread of social media apps that allow content creation, Indigenous peoples have embraced the tools of informal media production and broadcasting to distribute news, information and contribute to cultural discourse and debate (Carlson & Frazer, 2018). Some Aboriginal media services have worked to produce multi-platform content; NITV now gets a bigger audience on Facebook than on their TV service. Without significant funding, providers like the *Koori Mail* have developed podcasts, and local radio stations such as Wilcannia River Radio have used their social media pages to share news and updates (Stuchbery et al., 2021). Inge Kral (2009) argues that digital communications and ICT are stepping in where education is failing, allowing for the development of literacy alongside creative expression, which can also facilitate knowledge transfer. The growth in these platforms is giving space to young Aboriginal creators.

Social media, however, must be treated with some sensitivity and nuance. As Bronwyn Carlson and Tanja Dreher (2018, p. 16) argue, 'Indigenous people have harnessed the affordances of social media' but this 'can be a double-edged sword, as Indigenous people are exposed to racist discourse and traumatic content online and often experience direct threats of violence.' The Social Media Mob study summarises key complexities in social media use—for example, how it provides the opportunity to connect with relatives and lost loved ones and keep in touch with family when living away from connections and Country, while at the same time allowing a space for racism, bullying and harassment (Carlson & Frazer, 2018).

4.11 COVID-19, trust and emergencies

All community media acts as an alternative source of news and culture. However, Aboriginal community-controlled media—especially broadcasting—also provides essential services, such as emergency information. In some locations, such as Wilcannia, Aboriginal community-controlled media is the dominant local source of news and information (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a). Aboriginal community-controlled media has been best positioned to respond to COVID-19 by relaying localised information, responding to local concerns, and translating material, often with as little as 12 hours' notice. A study of Aboriginal community-controlled media and the COVID-19 response found that it was essential to 'tailoring and localising messages in culturally appropriate ways' (Stuchbery et al, 2022, p. 10). Stuchbery et al (2022) argue that Aboriginal media-makers' local situatedness and their connections to, and concerns for, community welfare meant coverage was responsible, swift, and effective. The study argues that Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations need 'committed funding' to tailor messaging for ongoing pandemic responsiveness, emergencies and future vaccine rollouts, and that health and other related government departments can learn from, and with, Aboriginal media representatives about how to effectively communicate with audiences. Local Aboriginal media are respected and integrated into community, capable of facilitating community participation in decision-making, and capable of building trust—features that have been essential to combating misinformation and fear (Stuchbery et al., 2022, p. 6). Social Ventures Australia (2017, p. 75) identify trust as 'necessary' for listeners to engage with content and act on it, and that this trust was crucial to the success and uniqueness of Aboriginal community-controlled media. Like the recent Hugh Watson Consulting (2021) review, Social Ventures Australia (2017) also argues that these levels of community trust illustrate the important role Aboriginal community-controlled media could play as partners in co-design and collaboration for Closing the Gap and the Voice consultations.

5 Implications and conclusion

There are several key takeaways from this paper. First, the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap provides significant potential for the growth and support of Aboriginal community-controlled media. Aboriginal community-controlled media is very well placed to assist in the Closing the Gap aims as the Joint Communications Strategy proposes. The potential of Aboriginal community-controlled media has been repeatedly identified in numerous reviews since the 2000s, but the National Agreement is the first to take it seriously.

The National Agreement identifies the need for data development. There is limited data on how Aboriginal audiences access and consume media in NSW. However, national data indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences consume a broad range of media including commercial, public and community media, and that, where available, Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations are valued and trusted sources of information for Aboriginal audiences.

Further data is required to assist in measuring progress towards Closing the Gap outcomes, including:

- levels of digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including on available internet and mobile infrastructure and household-level access to internet, phones, radio and television services
- audience characteristics for Aboriginal community-controlled media nationally and in NSW
- types of content being broadcast on Aboriginal community-controlled media and how it relates to specific Closing the Gap outcomes and policy areas
- numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in media organisations (both community-controlled and other)
- types and scope of digital literacy training available and accessed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and its effectiveness
- the proportion of government communications budget at national, state, local, departmental and agency levels that goes towards Aboriginal community-controlled media
- types of media and communications that enjoy high levels of trust by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In keeping with the spirit of partnership in the National Agreement, serious consideration must be given to empowering Aboriginal community-controlled media and Aboriginal organisations themselves to steward research and development initiatives on their sector and on digital inclusion.

The value of Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations extends beyond simple provision of information. These organisations also provide emergency services and community services such as helping facilitate information and events, including consultations and representative meetings that could assist in co-design and partnership processes. Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations also act as language and culture centres that promote use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and celebrate achievements. They provide employment and training rarely otherwise available, and this training can be used across communications and media. Aboriginal community-controlled media organisations often provide a deeper consideration of issues affecting Aboriginal peoples and avoid misrepresentation of Aboriginal issues or alienating their audiences, making an important

contribution to combating racism and systemic bias and to facilitating wellbeing. Aboriginal community-controlled media, then, provides appropriate, unique and place-based news and information, and sensitive and valued representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and stories. This is especially evident in case studies of COVID-19 communications.

Aboriginal community-controlled media can empower local voices, speak back to stereotypes and nourish cultural expression in ways that contribute to a number of Closing the Gap aims. As the recent review by Hugh Watson Consulting (2021) illustrates, Aboriginal community-controlled media has great potential to facilitate broad health and wellbeing, and to promote Aboriginal languages and cultures. Examples include (First Nations Media Australia, 2019a; Hugh Watson Consulting, 2021; Stevens, 2010):

- the promotion of health services to help close the gap in life expectancy and mortality rates
- improved early childhood education and children's literacy attainment through culturally appropriate and multilingual programming for children
- greater training and employment prospects through good local jobs
- supporting Aboriginal languages and their speakers through Aboriginal language content
- and preserving languages, culture and history through archiving of Aboriginal controlled media content

There are some risks involved in the current environment facing Aboriginal community controlled media. One risk inherent in Closing the Gap is future policy change. Sector funding contingent on specific policy aims is vulnerable to elections and policy shifts. The link to a particular policy also heralds risk: Aboriginal community-controlled media is independent media and needs the freedom to choose their engagement in government programs, and genuine assurance that this will not compromise their ability to report freely and fairly as a 'fourth estate' producing Aboriginal perspectives on political and policy issues. Another risk is that the focus on digital inclusion emphasises access to services rather than the effectiveness and appropriateness of the messages and communications being received via media and communications. A major concern is also the failure of funding and service provision to provide for multi-platform media and news creation, with a particularly outdated focus on radio only, limiting engagement, audience, collaboration and content-sharing between organisations. This also limits creative opportunities that could encourage digital engagement and inclusion. There is a need for policy and funding which allows the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector to take advantage of the benefits of digital technologies and the multi-platform media environment.

The National Agreement provides a crucial role for Aboriginal community-controlled media in leading the Joint Communications Strategy. The capacity-building needs of the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector have been made clear by the peak body, FNMA. As FNMA argues, a first policy shift at all levels of government could be the direct contracting of Aboriginal community-controlled media for producing and delivering tailored government messaging. However, as FNMA and decades of research on Aboriginal community-controlled media policy argue, broader shifts are needed. There are significant resource constraints experienced by Aboriginal media organisations that need to be addressed for the potential of the National Agreement to be realised. This is particularly the case in NSW, where the Aboriginal community-controlled media sector is especially small and where expanding this sector is necessary to meet the spirit of the National Agreement and the Joint Communications Strategy.

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled media has existed in a policy vacuum since the mid-2000s and faces significant legislative obstacles to commercialisation and job employment opportunities. Many of the policy issues and concerns of Aboriginal community-controlled media remain the same as they have been in recent decades. Serious engagement with these concerns, and an appetite for reform and renewed funding, is necessary to realise the potential in the Closing the Gap partnership.

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