

# Don't cut off our tongues: Yolngu voices in news and policymaking

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## **Abstract**

Few studies have explored the ways in which Indigenous peoples contribute to shaping public and policy agendas through their various uses of the news media. This paper draws on interviews with policy actors, including Indigenous activists, media professionals and educators. Through their spoken words it identifies how Yolngu people, from North-East Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory, have used Indigenous public spheres and media logics to penetrate public policy debate about bilingual education. Research participants emphasised the importance of Yolngu governance practices for discussion, decision-making and action in their media campaigns to retain their bilingual curriculum. Through their accounts, a picture emerges of the constitution of the contemporary Yolngu public sphere.

**Keywords:** Indigenous public spheres; news and bilingual education; news media and Indigenous policy

## **Introduction**

Indigenous policy advocates in Australia have played an important, but not well-understood or recognised, role in keeping alive policy and public debate about issues such as the importance of bilingual education and community-controlled health programs. However, there has been limited research exploring the ways in which they contribute to shaping public and policy agendas through their various uses of the news media. Yolngu people from North-East Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory emphasise the importance of traditional governance practices in developing and implementing political and media campaigns to retain their schools' bilingual curriculum. This paper presents qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with Yolngu activists and others who were intimately involved in the politics and media coverage of bilingual education during the policy debate in 1998-1999. Their words and the analysis construct an understanding of the nature and importance of Indigenous public spheres in the policymaking process. The study also provides an account of how the contemporary Yolngu public sphere is constituted.

This research contributes to the Media and Indigenous Policy project<sup>1</sup>, which has explored the relationships between the representation of Indigenous peoples in public media and a range of Indigenous affairs policies from 1988 to 2008. One focus has been the interplay of news media and the Northern Territory's policy of bilingual education for Indigenous children living in some remote communities (Waller 2013a). The bilingual programs use both the vernacular and English as the mediums of instruction and include Indigenous knowledge and culture in the curriculum. The policy has been the subject of controversial shifts since its introduction by the Whitlam government in 1972. In 1998-99, the Northern

Territory Government attempted to abolish the programs (Hoogenraad 2001, p. 131), a move that was fiercely, and successfully, contested by the bilingual education lobby, comprised of Indigenous communities, educators, linguists, land councils, trade unions, human rights groups and others. Bilingual education programs survived until 2008, when the territory government effectively abolished them with the decision that the first four hours of teaching in all schools would be in English (Waller 2012). Once again, the bilingual education lobby campaigned to have the decision overturned. The programs were back on the policy agenda, but another report (Wilson 2013) has not offered a strong endorsement of bilingual approaches. Affected communities and their supporters continue to advocate for the programs. The unsettled policy terrain underlines that this is an ‘intractable’, or wicked, policy problem (Hunter 2007). There is considerable evidence to support the argument that mainstream media coverage and commentary about remote Indigenous educational achievement and bilingual education programs was the trigger for the Northern Territory to abolish the programs in 2008 (Simpson et al., 2009; Waller, 2012).

There is not space here to compare the bilingual education policy campaign with other Indigenous policy campaigns, such as those regarding health and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), which the wider project investigated and are discussed elsewhere (see McCallum 2012; McCallum & Reid 2012; McCallum & Waller 2013). However, it is worth noting the key finding that in all cases, both public and policy discussion was shaped by the wider discursive environment, particularly in 2007-08. Powerful elites, including politicians and the news media, advocated a neo-liberal policy agenda of individual responsibility and technical, market-based solutions for complex Indigenous social problems (Altman 2010). Indigenous figures, including Cape York leader Noel Pearson, whose views aligned with this approach, were heard clearly. However, it was difficult for Indigenous voices from the Northern Territory to intervene in both public and policy discussion (McCallum & Waller 2013).

The period under discussion in this paper occurred a decade earlier, within the wider discursive environment of reconciliation. We contend that during the reconciliation era decision-makers recognised the principles of self-determination and social justice, which provided more favourable conditions for Indigenous participation in news and policymaking (Waller 2012). This paper provides evidence of how Yolngu public sphere activities influenced media and policy discussion of bilingual education in the wake of the 1998 decision to axe the policy. This historical moment is significant not only to the policy’s history, but to the continuities and strategies of Yolngu resistance to subsequent attempts by Northern Territory governments to dismantle bilingual education.

The research is based on interviews and uses the spoken words of participants to gain access to the local experiences and perspectives of those invested in developing, influencing and communicating the bilingual education policy. Through the analysis of more than 20 interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous bilingual education advocates as well as journalists, public servants, academics and politicians, we have identified a range of mechanisms that have enabled Yolngu to penetrate the policy debate, define problems for policymaking and public discussion through the news media, and thereby exert particular forms of influence in the policy process (McCallum et al. 2012).

This paper builds on McCallum et al.'s (2012) work on Indigenous engagement with mainstream policy debates to provide an insight into these incursions into the dominant media-policy nexus in a specific Indigenous policy process. This paper argues that the Yolngu public sphere was pivotal in policy discussion in the wider public sphere and is best understood as incorporating traditional governance practices, as well as Indigenous owned and controlled media activities, outlets and their active audiences.

## **Media representation and Indigenous public spheres**

Media studies have concluded that news reporting overwhelmingly represents Indigenous Australians as a source of societal risk and as problematic for the mainstream, and that Indigenous policy is generally only of interest when it meets a narrow range of news values – most importantly, conflict and proximity to political elites (Jakubowicz et al. 1994; McCallum 2007, 2010; Meadows 2001; Mickler 1998). In response to Cottle's (2003) call to look beyond racist journalism in mainstream public spheres as an explanation for stereotypical media coverage and poor policy outcomes, we have identified a body of research that examines the efficacy of marginalised groups in the public discussion of intractable policy disputes (Bakir 2006; Dreher 2010; Lester & Hutchins 2009). Marginalised groups, including Indigenous Australians, have limited access to the formal channels of influence in ministries and bureaucracies compared with established interest groups – for example, mining companies (Maddison 2009). They therefore have little choice but to use the news media to convey their concerns to policymakers (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010).

A number of studies have examined the way Indigenous peoples develop their own public spheres, and have actively promoted and responded to issue frames (Avison & Meadows 2000; Hartley 2003; Hartley & McKee 2000; Meadows 2005; Tafler 2005). Engaging with Habermas's (1986) public sphere tradition, Hartley and McKee (2000) coined the term 'Indigenous public sphere'. They argue that Indigenous people should not be viewed as powerless victims of media representation because they take an active role - making their own media and purposefully using it to represent themselves to their own communities as well as the mainstream, advance their political and social agendas, and as a tool for community building. Hartley (2003) argues for a rethinking of the concept of the public sphere to 'one that emphasises the way communities can come together, define identities and "represent" themselves in a virtual sense, in and through the media' (2003, p. 46). However, this research is concerned mainly with how indigeneity is constructed within the wider public sphere. Other studies (Avison & Meadows 2000; Meadows 2005; Tafler 2005) have explored how communication practices inform and shape Indigenous public sphere activity. In other words, they offer ways to understand how Indigenous people 'make themselves' within their own public spheres (Rennie 2002), and the implications that flow from this – including how these deliberations are then able to interact with the wider public sphere (Meadows 2005, p. 38). Avison and Meadows (2000) draw on Nancy Fraser's critique (1993) of Habermas's theory of the public sphere (1986) to argue that rather than there being one all-encompassing public sphere there are 'parallel and overlapping public spheres, where those with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities that stem from their own issues and interests' (2000 p. 347). In

this way, they develop distinctive discursive styles and generate their own angles on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere where they are able to interact ‘across lines of cultural diversity’ (Fraser 1993, p. 13).

### **Yolngu governance**

Yolngu use metaphor to describe and explain the operation of their governance processes (Marika et al. 2009), which can be understood as part of their own public sphere (Hartley & McKee 2000, Meadows 2005; Tafler 2005; Burrows 2010, 2014). One of the metaphors which is used to discuss the right way to conduct discussion and decision-making describes a series of circular kinship processes that connect groups of people and is rooted in their land, ancestors and culture:

... traditional owner clan groups gather around the fire in a circle and have equal decision making power to each other. The fire in the middle is the hearth - it represents a place where people talk, where the fire burns. (Marika et al. 2009)

These circular processes are intimately connected to their land and their practices of caring for country (Marika 1999). Research participants emphasised the importance of their traditional practices for discussion, debate, decision-making and action in their campaigns to retain their bilingual curriculum. Through their accounts of how these traditional practices inform their media-related practices, a picture emerges of how the contemporary Yolngu public sphere is constituted. It is important to note that Indigenous cultures, like all cultures, are not static. They are the products of contestations, divisions and the mobilisation of resources by particular agents within the boundaries prescribed by cultural and social systems (O'Regan 1993). This needs to be acknowledged so as to recognise their transformative capacity and leave behind any idea that cultural transformation means they are in any way less Indigenous or more westernised (Alia 2010, p. 8; Altman 2010).

### **The ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign**

In 1998-99 Yolngu organised the ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign to stop the government dismantling its bilingual education policy. One participant recalled how the campaign got its name:

They developed a post card type thing, yeah, a post card and it was called – it was about cutting off their tongues basically. And that was the slogan, if you’re going to do this, you’re going to cut off our tongues and they used that very effectively.

The post card campaign and the petition with 3000 signatories (the biggest petition ever tabled in the Northern Territory parliament at the time) are evidence of the continuing importance and effectiveness of traditional circles within a contemporary Indigenous public sphere. These were grassroots strategies that began within Yolngu community councils and worked outwards through a system of circles into the wider Indigenous public sphere and the mainstream. They flowed through communities within North-East Arnhem Land, across the Northern Territory and the nation by hand and via ‘snail mail’, as well as a website that was established by Indigenous people and language activists. These strategies relied on

personal connections, community and organisational networks, links with 'outside' organisations such as reconciliation groups and unions.

The 'Don't cut off our tongues' campaign provides evidence to support Meadows' (2005) theory about the importance of Indigenous spheres both within Indigenous Australia and for interacting with the wider public sphere. He suggests that:

Indigenous public spheres can be seen as providing opportunities for people who are regularly subordinated and ignored by mainstream public sphere processes. They enable Indigenous people to deliberate together, to develop their own counter-discourses, and to interpret their own identities and experiences. The deliberations are then able to interact with the wider public sphere – in theory. (Meadows 2005, p.38)

It also offers insights into the constitution and operation of a specific Indigenous public sphere, building on the work of Tafler (2005) who has provided an insight into an Indigenous public sphere on the Anangu lands in Central Australia at a particular point in time. Participants provided precise local understandings of the functioning of the Yolngu public sphere, including the central role of Indigenous media experts and media outlets in building grassroots support for the campaign, influencing mainstream media coverage and ultimately the policy. They detailed their media-related practices within Indigenous public spheres and the ways in which these articulated with the mainstream public sphere. These media-related practices were closely tied to local forums where people met to deliberate together, including the school council and the community council. Dr Marika said the basis of all their plans was the Nambara School Council, which is the school's governing body and action group:

We worked together with the elders, writing down their ideas. Then we negotiated the elders' ideas into a form that the western ... system could understand. To negotiate what we wanted we had to be able to put our ideas in their way. (Marika 1999, p. 7)

Participants described how slogans were devised, media strategies were planned, media professionals were recruited and Indigenous people across the territory participated in the campaign by producing and interacting with their own media, especially community radio such as Radio Larrakia and the community television service ICTV, which have tended to be the preference of Indigenous audiences (Meadows 2012). The result was the state-wide 'Don't cut off our tongues' campaign, which contributed to the survival of the Northern Territory's bilingual education policy for another decade.

## **Indigenous media and Indigenous public spheres**

Indigenous Australians had their own systems for communicating for thousands of years before colonisation and continue these practices in a wide range of contemporary ways (Tafler 2005). The development of Indigenous media in Australia is in many ways an extension of these specific practices (O'Regan 1993; Michaels 1986; Christie 2013). It is also part of a global movement in which media is used to campaign for cultural and political change - enabling the marginalised throughout the world to speak as well as hear (Alia 2010). Indigenous people have a number of general aims for their media activities,

including countering negative stereotypes, addressing information gaps in non-Indigenous society, and reinforcing community cultures (Meadows 2005).

In the campaign to retain bilingual education in 1998-99, many circles within the Indigenous public sphere were active and connected. These circles include local Yolngu bodies, a wide network of Indigenous organisations and communities throughout Arnhem Land and the rest of the Northern Territory. These circles are linked by kinship systems and personal connections, through organisational networks, common interests and Indigenous media outlets, especially the large network of community radio stations that operate across the Northern Territory (Meadows 2012).

The importance of collective, consensus thinking is evident in traditional Yolngu forums where decision-making powers are shared between clans and represented by a circle. Yolngu explain that:

In our community, solutions come from the ground up – from the relationships, practices and shared or negotiated understandings that arise from working together. The real decision-making is done outside of formal *Ngapaki*<sup>2</sup> structures, through Yolngu relationships and processes making sure that the right people make the decisions for the right country. (Marika et al. 2009, p. 406)

This Yolngu perspective echoes Tafler's (2005) observations on the constitution of the Anangu public sphere in Central Australia:

The real negotiation transpired not in the foreground of the community meeting, where the speakers gathered at the (radio) microphone, but in the background among the small clusters of individuals seated around the community. In those smaller groups, people listened to the speakers, conversed, and either reached consensus or, at the very least, defined the issues. All of the myriad components of the environment – the freely roaming children, the freely roaming dogs, the passing vehicles, the drinks and cigarettes, helped mediate the conversation. (Tafler 2005, p. 168)

### **Governance, relationship and media strategy**

Former school principal Leon White explained that the Nambara School Council initiated, organised and led the local campaign to retain the bilingual programs in 1998-99. This included lobbying government, organising the post card campaign, the petition, and several demonstrations in the major centres of Nhulumbuy in North-east Arnhem Land and the territory's capital, Darwin. He said the community's sophisticated media campaign was the key feature of their approach. Yolngu used a number of media strategies, including staging events such as the protests, and using Indigenous media, including community radio, community television and *Land Rights News*, the newspaper produced by the Northern and Central Land Councils, to keep Indigenous communities throughout the territory informed about the issue and what they could do to help. However, participants said the most strategic and effective move involved the Nambara School Council employing an experienced media consultant to run a campaign specifically targeted at the national, mainstream media. Leon White said:

The school [council] employed Ursula Raymond who now works for NITV, and she did work for the ABC at one stage. She's in Darwin ... we employed her as a media consultant.

While Raymond handled the mainstream media, Yolngu dealt with local, territory and national Indigenous media outlets directly. Raymond is well known and regarded in both the wider Northern Territory Indigenous field and also the mainstream media and political fields. She has worked as a reporter and a media consultant for a number of Indigenous media and political organisations, as well as mainstream politicians. Her education and training in journalism and significant experience in the field has given her the skills and know-how of a mainstream journalist. She said she was trained by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and worked there 'for probably 15 or 16 years after I left uni'. At the height of her career in mainstream journalism she was a producer on the national broadcaster's long-running Indigenous program *Awaye*. Raymond said her longstanding and respectful relationship with key members of the Yolngu community was key to the Nambara School Council's decision to involve her in its work. She said:

I was asked ... because I know a lot of people out at Yirrkala and I was rung up by the school and asked if I'd be interested in working the campaign with them and so I said yes.

Raymond said her job was made easy because through their traditional public sphere activities in the school council and community council, Yolngu had discussed the issue at length, developed the positions they wanted to take in the debate and devised detailed strategies for challenging the government's decision to axe their bilingual programs. This included employing Raymond to liaise with the mainstream media. She said that through these processes 'they were unified on the issue and very clear', so their position could be presented well in media releases and in interviews with mainstream journalists. Raymond said the media strategy succeeded, resulting in coverage by the ABC's *7.30 Report*, *Living Black* on SBS, as well as major metropolitan newspapers based on the eastern seaboard, including *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*.

### **Indigenous media outlets**

Meadows et al. (2009) emphasise that Indigenous community media play a critical role in maintaining cultures and languages, creating and strengthening notions of identity 'in the face of global, national and international stereotypes' (p. 17). They observe that:

...where they are active, Indigenous community broadcasting outlets are linked intimately with local community structures. (Meadows et al. p. 22)

Participants in our study underlined the central role of Indigenous media outlets as extensions of their traditional forums for people to deliberate together and advance their own policy discourses, and Tafler (2005) argues that this represents a broadening and deepening of democratic practice. The Indigenous media system moves information horizontally, rather than it having to follow the traditional vertical flow down from the elders. Participants said that Indigenous community radio in particular allowed people across Arnhem Land and throughout the territory to follow the issue as it unfolded and provided everyone with an opportunity to speak. Tafler (2005) observes that media technologies accelerate the speed of discussion, which helps to crystallise the issue:

It permits all individuals to participate at all times from their respective location across the lands. Space (location) becomes immaterial. Nobody has to organise the forum and everybody can have the capacity to stay informed.

Information passes across the lands in horizontal waves in defiance of the traditional vertical order. In a community-based system where nearly everybody knows everybody else, every voice has an audience. (Tafler 2005, p.164)

Raymond said Yolngu activists had no hesitation about approaching local Indigenous media outlets such as Yolngu Radio Service directly, or those further away through the Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association Service. They developed story ideas, and interacted with program producers and other audience members about the issue. They had strong relationships with organisations and the people who work at these outlets. They have a wealth of experience with Indigenous community radio in particular, and regarded it as essential in any local campaign. She said they found it easy to work with Indigenous media on the ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign because they interacted with them on a regular basis:

... They’re doing that stuff through their own local media networks, Indigenous radio, the national Indigenous radio service and their own Koori radio, radio Larrakia, CAAMA [television and radio], those sorts of places.

She said her role in the campaign did not involve dealing with Indigenous media outlets at all as Yolngu activists were capable and enthusiastic about liaising directly with people they knew within Indigenous media organisations. They were confident about speaking to these media workers and discussing the issue with Indigenous audiences:

The people out there, they utilise Indigenous media a lot of the time off their own bat anyway. They knew them and they just worked them.

Mainstream news is constructed through co-operation between journalists and their sources, and they maintain close contact and shared values (Soley 1992). Participants described the relationship between Indigenous media organisations and their sources from the Yolngu community with this kind of confidence and familiarity.

Participants said mainstream journalists with an interest in Indigenous affairs also rely on Indigenous media to stay abreast of what the issues are; in other words, to monitor Indigenous news agendas, glean story ideas and identify Indigenous sources for their own reports. Meadows et al. (2009) say Indigenous media outlets also inadvertently play an important role in educating the broader audience about ideas and assumptions outside their usual frames of reference.

### **The role of Indigenous leaders**

Established Indigenous leaders can exert considerable influence in public and policy discussions through their use of both Indigenous media and the mainstream news media. Both provide platforms for advancing their agendas and taking on their opponents (McCallum et al. 2012). Participants identified effective leaders as those with well-developed media skills. Raymond said:

There are some like [Yolngu leader] Galarruy Yunupingu who's incredibly sharp and knows how to work the media.

The Indigenous public sphere plays an important role in nurturing emerging leaders and supporting the authority of those who are already recognised. On a practical level, it helps leaders in the making to develop their political and media skills before they enter the cut and thrust of the mainstream. It ensures they can

test their approaches and become more widely known for their ideas and actions within their own communities, as well as in other Indigenous communities. It allows them to listen to the people they represent, as well as providing the facility to speak on their behalf. Therefore, continuing engagement with Indigenous media is necessary for tuning in to public opinion and having dialogue with the community as a way of legitimating their authority to speak.

A *lack* of strong Indigenous leadership can make it difficult to advance an issue, or start a discussion in the mainstream public sphere. Leon White said in 1999 Yolngu had leaders with national media profiles, including Yothu Yindi lead singer M. Yunupingu. In 2008, when Yolngu found it difficult to attract mainstream media attention for their campaign to save bilingual education, these leaders were no longer in the community due to death or ill-health. Reflecting on the success of the 1998-99 campaign, White said:

We also had people like [internationally renowned Yolngu educator] Dr Marika who's now passed away and M.'s [Yunupingu] wife and others who took leadership of this. They're no longer with us<sup>3</sup>.

### **Amplifying the issue**

The political communication literature identifies 'media logic' (Altheide & Snow 1979) as central to the way powerful elites see and interpret social affairs. In this view, politics has become mediatised, increasingly adapted to media production routines and values (Davis 2007a; Strömbäck, & Esser 2014). Successful politicians have to be media-genic and media savvy; personalised leadership has become more important than parties (and ideologies); election campaigns tend to be media-driven and voters get their image of politics and politicians from media representation, which responds primarily to media logic and has indeed been transformed by changes in the media (Strömbäck 2008; Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). These trends are indicators also of the power of the media to shape political reality. Indigenous politicians and activists understand media power and employ many of the same media-related strategies as their mainstream political counterparts.

Yolngu people's media-related practices during the 'Don't cut off our tongues' campaign provide evidence of their understanding that media logic can work to amplify certain issues, topics, and events through the news by framing them to fit the news values and production routines of media organisations (Davis 2007b). For example, participants said they staged events to attract media attention, including a march and demonstrations.

Yolngu draw on a range of media expertise from within their own spheres to represent their interests in the mainstream. They have developed their own communication channels, have access to expert media advice and provide media training. This includes teaching people to use digital technologies to create and operate their own 'media hubs', to providing spokespeople with formal media training. Several participants gave examples of Yolngu organisations investing in the services of Indigenous media consultants such as Raymond, with skills and experience in mainstream media to co-ordinate specific campaigns and strategies. Others pointed to large Indigenous organisations Yolngu are closely associated with, including the Northern Land Council, which has in-house media services that perform a range of functions. These include producing a newspaper, *Land*

*Rights News*, to closely managing relationships between Indigenous leaders and mainstream journalists.

### **Media savvy and successful**

Participants identified engaging with the mainstream media as a key strategy for influencing the bilingual policy debate and amplifying the Yolngu position. They had a two-pronged approach to mainstream media coverage. The first was employing a highly skilled and well-connected media professional to generate mainstream media interest and manage interactions, including setting up interviews and arranging journalists' visits to the community. The second was people on the ground using media logic to promote their message. They had community members with media training and experience prepared and ready to be interviewed. They also had developed and practised 'key lines' to get their message across in a few seconds, to suit media production needs. Participants made direct links between having an excellent media strategy and success in influencing the policy process.

Raymond attributed the effectiveness of the bilingual education campaign to her Yolngu clients being 'media savvy' (Hartley 2003):

They understood the media, they understood the messages that they wanted to get out so they knew how to work that ... They were very open to talking to the media. They had their key spokespeople identified and prepped and ready to go.

Trying to ensure their perspectives are heard loud and clear in the mainstream media is crucial for Indigenous people who want to counter their political opponents (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). One participant expressed the importance of using the same media tactics as other policy actors to advance Indigenous policy positions:

... in the same kinds of formats and in the same kind of arenas where they chose to take us on... I think what they expected was that we wouldn't have a voice to give back, but in fact a lot of us were influential in *The Age*, in *The Weekend Australian* and in our own media, and I think, we were very successful.

Journalists with the cultural competence to negotiate Indigenous public spheres understand the continuing importance of attending Indigenous forums so they know what issues are of concern (McCallum et al. 2012; Waller 2013b). These journalists maintain contacts within local decision-making bodies and attend key meetings and functions held by Indigenous organisations. Tony Koch of *The Australian* says:

Every community's run by a council and so ... you keep in contact that way ... you attend conferences and they come to Brisbane or to Townsville or Cairns regularly and so you meet up.

### **Conclusions**

The Media and Indigenous Policy project has examined the relationships between the development of Indigenous affairs policies and news media practices in a

range of policy settings, with a particular interest in the ways Indigenous people use the media to advance their policy agendas and keep issues such as bilingual education alive. This research emphasises that Yolngu governance processes need to be considered as central to understanding their contemporary public sphere, how it interfaces with mainstream public spheres and plays into the policy process. The ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign provides an exemplar of the continuing importance of traditional circles within a contemporary Indigenous public sphere. These activities closely informed their media strategy. It also provides evidence to support Meadows’ (2005) theory about the importance of Indigenous public spheres both within Indigenous Australia and for interacting with the wider public sphere. This examination of how the Yolngu public sphere operated during the ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign has generated some precise insights into its constitution and the mechanisms through which it interacted with mainstream public spheres. These include media logic, leaders’ abilities to penetrate mainstream discussion and the role of Indigenous media in facilitating community engagement and shaping the wider news agenda. As Marika et al. (2009) suggest, the circles within the Yolngu public sphere do not just flow in one direction. This echoes Tafler’s (2005) findings on Indigenous media’s democratising role as it enables horizontal transmission of news and debate. Yolngu demonstrated the know-how and confidence to assert their demands for culture and language to be part of their children’s education. They worked with Indigenous community media and executed grassroots strategies such as the post card campaign to ensure horizontal dissemination of information to involve as many people as possible in the issue. Indigenous media professionals and leaders were able to assert their agenda by using media logic to engage mainstream media and influence wider public and policy discussions. The ‘Don’t cut off our tongues’ campaign took place before the advent of social media, so studies that investigate how these new media tools are being incorporated into Indigenous public sphere activities and how they might provide links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous public spheres would make a valuable contribution to furthering understanding of the critical role of Indigenous media in democratic processes.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ngapaki* refers to a non-Indigenous person or non-Indigenous systems, such as the Common Law.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the interview Yalmay Yunupingu and her husband were living in Darwin so Dr Yunupingu could receive medical treatment. At the time of writing Yalmay was living in Yirrkala.

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