

**RESISTING THE TRUANCY TRAP: INDIGENOUS
MEDIA AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN 'REMOTE'
AUSTRALIA**

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ABSTRACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are mobilizing a range of media forms to reveal, resist and shift what we term 'the truancy trap' – a simplistic, pervasive and powerful discourse of deficit about school attendance in 'remote' Indigenous communities that is perpetuated by mainstream media and Australian government policy. In this article, we draw upon Engoori®, an Indigenous educational intervention and research method, which provides a framework for moving institutions, organizations, communities and individuals out of deficit and into strength-based approaches. The Engoori process is activated here to surface and challenge the deficit assumptions that set the 'truancy trap', and as a lens for conceptualizing Indigenous media discussion, innovation and action on school attendance. The qualitative media analysis presented here reveals how a diversity of Indigenous media has been used in different ways to build a culture of inclusivity, belonging and connection; give Indigenous people a voice and reaffirm strengths in communities. The article contributes to international scholarship on Indigenous media as tools of resilience, resistance and education.

Keywords

Engoori; deficit discourse; Indigenous education; media and school attendance; Indigenous media; strength-based.

Introduction

Deficit discourses in education are counter-productive, circular and persistent:

Panics, crises and 'failures' of individuals, groups, schools and states are produced by the very same discourses that constitute and blame certain groups in society as lacking and responsible for their lack. (Comber and Kamler, 2004 p. 293)

Recent work shows that deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality is intricately entwined across different sites of representation, including the mainstream news media and Indigenous education policy (see Bamblett, 2011, 2013; Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty et al., 2017; Gorringer et al., 2011; McCallum and Waller, 2017; Simpson et al., 2009; Vass, 2013). Mithakaman, educator and researcher Scott Gorringer (2015) argues that 'when all the thinking, all the conversations and all the approaches are framed in a discourse that sees Aboriginality as a problem, very little positive movement is possible'.

This article draws on a qualitative analysis of Indigenous media about Aboriginal education. Our project investigates the prevalence of deficit discourse in mainstream media as well as the ways in which Indigenous media attempts to shift this discourse to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. A major component is an intervention called Engoori® (Gorringer and Spillman, 2008), which is being mobilised as part of the research at selected Australian schools. The Engoori process involves school communities in deep conversation that reveals and questions the assumptions that underpin deficit and moves them into strength-based conversations (Murrimatters.com). An emergent finding of our research is 'that once people begin challenging the [deficit discourse] it changes the conversation about what is possible in Indigenous education and policy' (Fogarty and Wilson, 2016).

This article extends Engoori® as an epistemological framework for examining how Indigenous people are using their own media forms to reveal and resist what we term 'the truancy trap': a simplistic and powerful discourse of deficit that saturates mainstream media and government policy

relating to ‘remote’¹ Indigenous education. It is a discourse that suppresses the historical, institutional, spatial and cultural contexts and complexities that have influenced contemporary challenges facing Aboriginal education in Australia (Gorringe, 2011; Guenther et al., 2014; Prout, 2009). For example, pervasive cultural and institutional racism meant there was no state education provided for Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory of Australia until the 1950s. The legacy of these policies can be seen in the large gaps in the provision of education services in remote Australia today.

The research approach taken here focuses on Indigenous media as tools of resilience, resistance and education used by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to achieve their self-determined aims (Waller et al., 2015). In the sections that follow Engoori® is extended as a framework for revealing and critically engaging with the deficit assumptions that power the ‘truancy trap’ and analysing a range of Indigenous media interventions. The research provides evidence of how Indigenous people are using media to resist the narrow, negative truancy discourse in dominant media and policy, and to improve school attendance in culturally appropriate and effective ways.

A context for Indigenous education

The education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a fundamental tenet of the ongoing colonial project in Australia. Since the British invasion in 1788, Indigenous people have experienced an education that reinforces the idea that Aboriginal beliefs and values are inferior to Western values. Furthermore, before the 1960s Indigenous people were denied access to the same educational opportunities afforded to non-Indigenous Australians (Burridge et al., 2012). This educational history, based largely on the ideology of Social Darwinism, has resulted in discrimination, marginalization and limited access and opportunity for Indigenous people (Beresford, 2003).

In the 21st century, racism remains embedded in dominant Western teaching spaces through the promotion of Western educational values above all others (Vass, 2014). The ‘hidden curriculum’, or ‘white privilege’, that disadvantages Indigenous

1 ‘Remote’ appears in scare quotes throughout the article to problematize this term that assumes a non-Indigenous centre and Indigenous periphery.

students who have not had exposure to the norms of Western culture is also well documented (see Andersen, 2011; Rahman, 2013). At a societal level, there has been a tendency to label, or just assume, Aboriginal students will be under-achievers at school (Fogarty et al., 2017). Public literature and perception about education in 'remote' and 'very remote' communities² is 'replete with the word "failure"' (Guenther and Bat, 2013, p. 145).

The way news media reports on 'remote' Indigenous education is intimately entwined with shifting policy emphases and direction (McCallum and Waller, 2017). In recent times, both have focused primarily on how the nation can 'close the gap' between 'remote' Indigenous and non-Indigenous education outcomes, using standardised tests in English language and school attendance records to measure 'progress' (Simpson et al., 2009; Guenther, 2013; Guenther et al., 2014). Recent research indicates that mainstream media representation was strongly implicated in the construction and representation of the 'bush school crisis' in 2013-2014³ (McCallum and Waller, in press). This mediated discourse contributed to the rise of the term 'truancy trap' which positions Indigenous children in a frame of societal risk. Relatedly, this framing blames parents and communities for 'poor performance' by these children due to non-attendance of school (Fogarty et al., 2017).

2 The concept of remoteness is an important dimension of policy development in Australia. 'Remote' and 'very remote' are technical terms used to describe geographic areas based on their distance from a range of population centres, as well as population characteristics. These categories are important as they are used to assess health, education and workforce needs and resources. More than half a million (540,286) people live in either remote or very remote areas of Australia. At 30 June 2011, 7% of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in Remote Australia (51,300 people) and 13.7% lived in Very Remote Australia (91,600 people). (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>)

3 'Bush school crisis' was the term used by the mainstream news media in 2013-14 to describe the profound problems identified in a report on education in remote Northern Territory Indigenous communities by the education consultant Bruce Wilson. See for example, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-02-07/indigenous-children-school-education-report-nt-release/5245126>

Truancy discourse in news media

School truancy is generally defined in policy discourse as the persistent, habitual and unexplained absence from school of a child of compulsory school age and it has long been deployed as a trope to mark deviancy in the education context. Gray (2000; Gray and Beresford, 2001; Gray and Partington, 2012) has documented the changing nature of attendance narratives in Indigenous education. She identified ‘truancy’ as a socially constructed discourse, with a focus on ‘correction and protection’, whereby truancy is framed as a stepping stone to anti-social behaviour, delinquency and crime and can become a justification for harsh intervention (Gray, 2000).

The issue of Aboriginal school attendance has been considered a problem since the mid 1980s and a focus of research, policy development and media interest ever since (Gray and Beresford, 2008). During the Reconciliation era (1990-2000) ‘truancy’ was replaced in policy discourse with the term ‘attendance’ as a way to frame the topic more positively and to shift from its punitive associations (Collins, 1999). However, under the umbrella of the Closing the Gap policy framework, it has re-emerged in policy and media discourse as a key indicator of Indigenous educational achievement, punitive measures have resurfaced and ‘truancy talk’ is alive, especially among mainstream journalists.

Authorised through the 2008 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform agenda, the policy framework is based on assumptions about the relationship between increased attendance and increased student performance on standardised tests in English language (Australian Government, 2017; Ladwig and Luke, 2014). The policy is complicated by the controversial Federal Government ‘Intervention’, introduced in 2007 and later modified by subsequent administrations, that involved withholding welfare payments from those Indigenous parents whose children were reportedly missing school.

‘Truancy’ emerged as an issue of prominence in news media reporting during the conservative government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013-15). It came on the back of a decade of strident and alarmist news media reporting of ‘remote’ communities and an increasingly neoliberal, deficit-driven Indigenous policy agenda. The fusing of the ‘deviance’ of truancy and the

‘correction’ of improving Indigenous educational outcomes in policy discourse provided mainstream journalists with a rich source of news.

During 2013 Indigenous school attendance was high on the national news agenda, reporting low levels of attendance, linking it with failure in high-stakes educational testing, and highlighting the failure of government policy and Indigenous communities to shift attendance rates (see for example, Everingham, 2014; Hamlyn, 2015). An independent review of education in the Northern Territory by education specialist Bruce Wilson (2013) provided a key news subsidy. Reporting on Wilson’s conclusion that: ‘incalculable resources devoted to ensuring children in remote communities turn up to school ... had been ‘effectively wasted’ (Ferrari, 2013), *The Australian* newspaper campaigned on government failure to increase school attendance with headlines such as ‘Universal failure’ of remote region schools – EXCLUSIVE’ (Ferrari, 2013). Australia’s public broadcaster, the ABC, also adopted ‘truancy talk’ with headlines such as:

Bigger smacks for poor NT student attendance (ABC, 2013)

Education experts say tougher truancy measures might be needed (Smail, 2013)

Truancy rates worries SA schools, as prosecutions of parents considered (Royal, 2015)

This news media discourse reflected a concerted effort from the Prime Minister and his Indigenous Affairs minister to address the constructed ‘truancy crisis’. At its height in 2014, official government websites pledged to ‘Get Kids to School’. Bessant (1995) has argued that in a media saturated policy environment the portrayed solution can become an entirely logical policy option. In this example, the repeated media representation of the truancy/social failure nexus validates the option of tying family welfare payments to school attendance.

The focus was intensified with the Remote School Attendance Strategy (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016), which was introduced for two years from

2014. In 2015 the Federal Government announced it was extending the \$28.4 million program for another three years to target schools with attendance rates below 70 per cent from 1998-2014. At the time of writing it operated in 77 schools across 74 'remote' Indigenous communities in five Australian states. RSAS has funded a range of initiatives, including the employment of local people as school attendance supervisors, and was outsourced to the privately owned National Employment Services Association.

These framings have shaped public understanding and race-based government policy that punishes parents for children's absences from school (Billings, 2009). In 2016, the overall attendance rate for Indigenous students nationally was 83.4 per cent, compared with 93.1 per cent for non-Indigenous students. In 2016, the Indigenous attendance rate in very remote areas was 66.4 per cent (www.closingthegap.pmc.gov.au). The most recent Closing the Gap report indicated there had been no real change in school attendance, with NT rates falling by 1.6 per cent (Australian Government, 2017). School attendance for Indigenous students decreases with remoteness. This highlights that the problem is more complicated than governments are currently acknowledging and suggests the need for a different approach. As we will show, some Indigenous communities are resisting the 'truancy trap' by shifting the discourse into strength-based conversations in and through their own media.

Engoori

Engoori® is one of a range of strategies and programs developed in recent times to counteract the prevalence of deficit mentality in the education system and classroom (see Sarra 2011; Fogarty and Schwab, 2012; Lester et al., 2013). For example, Pearson (2009) has refuted discourses that use structural disadvantage or 'victimhood' as an excuse for poor Indigenous education outcomes. The Engoori story belongs to Koorithulla Tjimpa (Black Hawk) of the Mithaka people of far south-west Queensland and was traditionally used in the Wurthumpa ceremony as a method of diplomacy between conflicting ideologies and groups (Murrimatters.com). In 2006 Gorringer and Spillman (2008) gained permission from Gorringer's old people to reinterpret the Mithaka ceremony (Gorringer et al., 2011).

They extended the concept and its related processes as a strength-based facilitation process for organizations, school leadership and in the classroom as a way of enabling and encouraging a shift away from a deficit mindset. It achieves this through recognition that people possess a range of strengths and by focusing on what keeps them strong. Engoori offers a guide to facilitating conversations that can reaffirm strengths in communities. It creates safe spaces to challenge assumptions people bring to deficit conversations and turn them into strength conversations to address complex challenges (Gorringer, 2011).

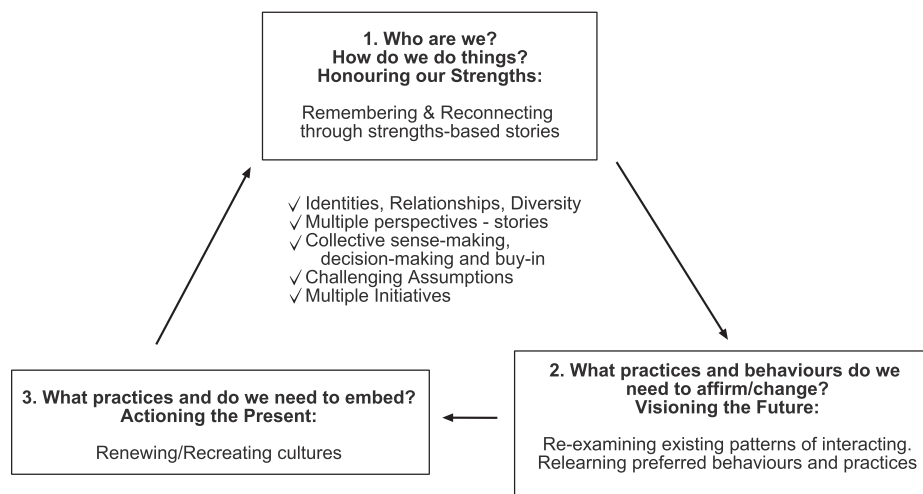


Figure 1: The Engoori® process has three stages comprised of explicit actions. Source: Murrimatters.com

Prosser et al. (2015, p. 22) argue that through such a framework, Indigenous people can ensure all voices are heard; discuss historical perspectives and ‘value add’ to assets identified in the community. As such, Engoori provides both a methodological and analytical framework through which to examine contemporary Indigenous education discourses.

In the tradition of other Australian Indigenous methodologies, especially Dadirri (Ungunmerr-Bauman, 2002; West et al., 2012) and ‘Red Dirt Thinking’ (Lester et al., 2013; Guenther et

al., 2014)⁴, we connect Engoori with elements of critical theory, specifically Freire's (1990 [1970]) transformative education process. From the outset Indigenist research has been closely entwined with the traditions of critical theory, which is guided by the goal of liberating people from domination, powerlessness, and oppression (Rigney, 1999 in West et al., 2012, p. 1585). Freire (1970) advocated that the knowledge and experience of the oppressed holds the solutions to the issues affecting their lives. For Freire (1970), and in Engoori® (Gorringer et al., 2011), deep conversation with structure, purpose and process provides the foundation of communication for positive change and takes place through an equal relationship among people. Engoori is a practice of deep conversation and co-creating transformative pathways. In the context of research, it is a method that enables working with Indigenous people and allowing their voices to be heard (Waller, 2018). Like Freire's transformational framework, Engoori provides a process for working through the challenges of how to create a space for what can be, and then co-creating it. As Freire explained: 'Thematic investigation becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and self, thus making it a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character' (Freire, 1990 [1970], p. 79).

Methods

Our aim was to understand how Aboriginal people are using their own media forms to reveal and resist the deficit discourse about remote school attendance. We identified and categorised media items relating to Indigenous education from 2000-2017 in the *Deficit Discourse in Indigenous Education* database. The

4 In the context of research, Dadirri, which is the language of the Ngangikurungkurr people of Daly River in Australia's Northern Territory as well as an epistemology, has been described as 'a process of listening, reflecting, observing the feelings and actions, reflecting and learning, and in the cyclic process, re-listening at deeper and deeper levels of understanding and knowledge building' (Atkinson, 2002, p. 19). The concept of a 'Red Dirt' curriculum was developed and in Central Australia. It brings together communities, teachers, and schools to incorporate and amplify local Aboriginal knowledge and priorities within the mainstream curriculum. Its proponents argue it assist students to learn both Indigenous and western knowledge, skills and social norms. Scaffolding from one knowledge system to the other and back again is an important pedagogical innovation (see Lester et al (2013).

Factiva and TVNews databases were used to find news items originating from online, print media and television news and current affairs, with search engines used for news web and social media pages. The search terms were 'Indigenous education', 'Aboriginal education', 'attendance', 'truancy', 'NAPLAN', 'Indigenous students', 'remote schools' and 'Northern Territory education'. Mainstream news sources included *ABC*, *SBS*, *The Australian*, *The Guardian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Canberra Times*, *NT News*, *The Courier-Mail*, and the *West Australian*. Indigenous and alternative news sources included *NITV*, *First Nations Telegraph*, *The Conversation*, *The Koori Mail*, *Crikey*, *New Matilda*, *Australian Teacher*, plus Facebook pages from Indigenous education activist groups. We also collected items from Indigenous community radio and television via the Indigenous Remote Communication Association (IRCA) website, as well as Indigitube and YouTube. Addressing privacy and ethical concerns about the 'extractive' nature of much social media research (Dreher et al., 2018), no social media accounts belonging to individuals were included in the participatory media analysis. We have only examined public pages that belong to Indigenous organizations⁵.

For this article, we focused on a subset of 357 items from Indigenous media related to school education from 2012-2017. The five-year time period was chosen to capture the lead-up to the announcement of the Remote School Attendance Strategy in 2014 and its aftermath. Media items were collected, recorded, and coded across a range of factors, including source, genre, topic and key spokesperson. Following the preliminary mapping and coding exercise, we conducted a close reading of each media item in concert with existing academic literature. Acknowledging the co-production of news and media between actors in the policy domain, we paid particular attention to the sponsors of different frames, dominant voices, overall tone, and

⁵ This research has approval from the human ethics committees of the Australian National University, Deakin University and University of Canberra and is part of an Indigenous led Australian Research Council Discovery Indigenous project (IN150100007) *Deficit Discourse and Indigenous Education* that conforms to the guidelines for ethical research in Australian Indigenous Studies. See <https://aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical-research/guidelines-ethical-research-australian-indigenous-studies>

key message indicated in the headline. This enabled valuable insights about how news and media items are produced and circulate in public discourse to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and school communities in terms of deficit. The analysis presented here is confined to items from the dataset that relate specifically to school attendance.

Engoori® guided all phases of the research, beginning with a question about how as Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers working together we could contribute to affirming community strengths and relationships around ‘remote’ Indigenous school attendance. It has provided the framework for a thematic investigation of relevant Indigenous media texts related to ‘remote’ school attendance during the period when the issue was in the policy and media spotlight (2012-2017). In the next section, we share key observations from our analysis of news, television, radio, and digital Indigenous media.

The Koori Mail

The Koori Mail is a 100 per cent owned Aboriginal commercial operation, published in hard copy weekly and online, and has a readership of more than 100,000 (Parker, 2011). The nationally distributed 25-year old newspaper prides itself on adhering to traditional journalism values, including objectivity (Parker, 2011).

Analysis of 185 education-focused articles published in *The Koori Mail* (2012-16) found remote school attendance was a regular topic, receiving the most coverage in 2014 at the height of the ‘bush school crisis’. Some uncritical reports of government policy announcements were included and the *Mail* provided a platform on several occasions for the federal minister and others to write supportive commentary. However, its coverage was mainly concerned with presenting Indigenous community perspectives on school attendance. These ranged from criticism of the policy under headlines including ‘Big stick is questioned’ (Koori Mail 27 August, 2014); to examination of underlying reasons for non-attendance such as racism and its impacts: ‘Educators hear of racism cost’ (Koori Mail 13 August 2014) and showcasing innovative local policy responses and attitudes: ‘School = pool for kids at Mutijulu’ (Koori Mail, 22 October 2014).

A 2015 article discussed findings from research conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Economic Participation into what people living in ‘remote’ Australia expect of their education system. In contrast to the Prime Minister’s ranking of school attendance as the No. 1 Closing the Gap priority (Harrison, 2014), attendance was ranked fourth priority by Indigenous research participants. ‘Parental involvement and providing of role models in children’s education’, ‘basic competence in reading, writing and numeracy’ and ‘community engagement with schools’ were the top three. (Koori Mail, 2015).

While we have not conducted a comprehensive comparison, we note that some reports shifted the spotlight away from Indigenous responsibility for education outcomes to focus on education department obligations. For example, a 2014 report highlights a quote from education consultant Bruce Wilson’s review of Indigenous education in the NT (Wilson, 2013) that: ‘... paints a deeply concerning picture about the system’s inability to provide the best quality education to our children’ (Koori Mail, 2014a). In another 2014 report, The Central Desert Regional Council discusses its own attendance policy designed to ‘create an environment where it was easier for families to get their kids ready for school’ (Koori Mail, 2014b). This is an example of strength-based conversations about attendance and Indigenous conceptions of success in schools that emerged as a strong theme in our analysis of Indigenous media.

National Indigenous Television (NITV)

NITV is a national, state-sponsored free-to-air television service that makes Indigenous voices and stories from across the country – and the world – readily accessible. Our analysis of fifteen NITV television and website reports revealed that the discussion about school attendance was framed in relation to cultural contexts and celebration of Indigenous education achievement. For example, the NITV website report ‘A graduation ceremony like no other’ (NITV, 2017) highlighted how Gunbalanya School in North-East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory blends Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage through the partnership of two co-principals, one non-Indigenous and one from the local community. It acknowledged attendance had been an issue during ceremony time, but took a strength-based approach to highlight that the school found a solution by adapting the semester dates around cultural obligations.

There were also stories that were critical of the Remote School Attendance Strategy. For example, in a television interview for ‘Indigenous school attendance rates spark push for truancy officers’ (McCarthy, 2013) a leading proponent of strength-based approaches in Indigenous education, Professor Chris Sarra, stated that introducing truancy officers was a ‘deficit based approach’⁶. Another expert who was quoted in the story, Professor Peter Buckskin, said the most pressing issue was to challenge state and territory governments about their seriousness in tackling the issue and making Australian classrooms more culturally safe – including making changes to the national curriculum to reflect Indigenous perspectives. Such initiatives are advocated by proponents of strength-based approaches that encourage students to have a positive sense of cultural identity (see for example, Lester, et al., 2013).

To sum up, these two national Indigenous media outlets covered the issue of school attendance for large Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences using professional journalism practices and routines. Their access and commitment to presenting a wider range of Indigenous sources than their mainstream counterparts ensured their reports presented multiple Indigenous perspectives and more diverse education stories on government education policy agendas. This media reframed official announcements and mainstream news for Aboriginal audiences and emphasized ‘good news’ stories about Indigenous achievement particularly those that highlighted local, ground-up stories and solutions based in individual schools and communities. These media practices can be understood to have interrupted dominant discourse about whose knowledge and whose reality counts (Thapliyal, 2017, 243).

Community radio and television

The first Indigenous-produced community radio programs in Australia went to air in 1972. Since then this vibrant and

⁶ Professor Chris Sarra is a Goreng Goreng man who in the late 1990s became the first Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School in Queensland where he fostered the ‘strong and smart’ approach to education that embraces a positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in contemporary Australia. In 2005, he founded and became chairman the Stronger Smarter Institute, which delivers leadership programs for school staff and communities throughout Australia. (see www.strongersmarter.com.au)

expanding community broadcasting sector has been seen as crucial for the promotion of Aboriginal culture and languages and the communication needs of Aboriginal communities. It has grown to include television and more than 130 community radio stations, establishing its own unique position in the Australian communication sphere (Sheppard, 2016). Our analysis of 16 community broadcast items demonstrates how Indigenous-led media is adept at working cooperatively within government policy agendas and discourses to adapt and reframe them to present a community perspective.

In 2015, the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) collaborated with remote communities and schools to produce radio content in support of school attendance. The project was funded by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to promote the goals of the RSAS and involved seven Remote Indigenous Media Organizations (RIMOs) based across Australia's top end⁷. Each media outlet produced positive messages and news about school attendance designed by and for the communities they serve. The 2016 remote Indigenous Media and Communications Survey highlights the importance and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander radio to local communities with 80 per cent of remote community members identifying as regular listeners to the radio services provided through remote Indigenous media organizations and remote Indigenous broadcasting services (IRCA, 2017).

Radio content included 'getting to school on time' messages in language, 'shout outs' to schools, jingles, schools shows and outdoor broadcasts. It featured the voices of community members, school staff and students, as well as parents. More than 120 items were produced, with live content aired as well. They varied in length from a just a few seconds to 10 minutes duration. Remote radio stations such as NG Media and PY Media recorded interviews with role models, principals and community leaders all giving the same message: 'It's important to go to school'. Radio was also used to send practical reminders in local languages, as well

⁷ The Remote Indigenous Media Organizations involved in the activity were CAAMA, NG Media, PAKAM, PAW Media, PY Media, QRAM and TEABBA. (see <https://irca.net.au/projects/remote-schools-attendance-radio-project> for further details.)

as English, about school term starting dates, bell times and things to do to help kids be active and alert at school. Children's voices featured prominently. They spoke about what they liked about school, read stories on air and performed songs. In a bid to recognize schools in their own areas and their importance to the community, participating media services often did 'shout outs', which are short messages by well-known locals that invite action. Most were done in live radio shows, but some were also recorded. In one show produced by CAAMA in Central Australia, an elder begins the 26 second message: 'Hey you kids, time to get ready, it's school time' before naming all of the schools in the region and finishing with the message: 'Give yourself the best chance to learn at school' (IRCA. 2015).

IRCA operates a digital streaming service called Indigitube that collects remote community media content and makes it accessible on the web for free. The School Attendance project material was made available via Indigitube as well as radio. Indigenous Community Television (ICTV) also received federal government funding to produce and broadcast videos on school attendance in the 2014-15 period. Analysis of the ICTV sponsored videos demonstrates diverse and local interpretations of the attendance issue. Our sample includes nine short videos that show diversity across language and geographic areas, and also in the range of perspectives on school attendance presented.

Desert Feet Media Artists, an incorporated association that uses music and the arts to create educational opportunities in remote communities, was commissioned to produce a 30 second advertisement called 'Olive Knight says Stay in School' (Short and Sweet, 2014). The creator, producer and star of the video is Kankawa Ngarra (Olive Knight), a respected Walmatjarri elder from the community of Wankatkjunka in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. She speaks directly to the camera, explaining the benefits of education and telling the audience that learning poetry in school inspired and helped her to write the lyrics for her songs.

Children are the stars in 'Pukatja get to school challenge' (Short and Sweet, 2015b). In this 1.42-minute video, three students from the Central Desert in South Australia, Nason,

Mykiah and Sadie, compete to see who can get to school on time. They are shown waking up, washing, dressing, eating a healthy breakfast and running to school as the narrator explains why each step is important to educational success. Nason sleeps in, but catches up with his sisters at the school gate, with the narrator declaring them all school attendance champions. The video ends with the voices of children from Pukatja singing the catchy jingle: 'I'm going to school'.

Encouraging deep community conversation is a key aim in some of the ICTV videos. *Dubbo stuff by Last Chance Crew* (Desert Pea Media Artists, 2013) was written, recorded and filmed in four days by students from Mian School in Dubbo, western NSW and has been viewed via Indigtube more than 36,000 times. Many Aboriginal students and school community members are involved in the performance of a powerful rap that says students have to 'learn the proper way' and 'education is our birthright'. It sought to create a deep conversation and student-led decision making about the complex challenge of attendance in one community, asking where does it come from? How can it change? Whose choice is it? And finally asks the audience what they are going to do to address the issue.

These examples show how resilient Indigenous communities use media to innovate and construct messages in their own voices for local communities. Through an Engoori lens, Indigenous community media can be understood to have provided a range of tools for affirming the identities of participating communities and supporting the network of remote schools subjected to the RSAS through positive actions. Furthermore, its strategy of utilizing multiple initiatives, including a range of languages, voices and formats demonstrates how diverse approaches can be combined to tackle complex challenges. In short, Indigenous community radio, television and digital media played a direct role in challenging the deficit discourse at the local level and amplified Indigenous representations of positive school attendance strategies for national and global audiences.

Indigenous participation in social media

In recent years, social media platforms have provided important forums for Indigenous people to discuss and organize around

issues of concern, including education (Carlson and Fraser, 2016). During the study period, Twitter provided a platform for the dissemination of news and opinion about school attendance while Facebook groups offered valuable spaces for sharing and networking of alternative viewpoints and experiences. Although not discussed in detail here, we found that blogs also provided an inexpensive platform for news production and were often widely disseminated through Indigenous social media networks, occasionally making their way into mainstream media forums, such as *The Guardian* (Waller et al., 2015).

We found a variety of examples of Indigenous people using digital and social media to debate and discuss government policies on school attendance. We also found instances of sharing strength-based resources through social media to develop different approaches to the challenge. Social media offered Indigenous perspectives, contexts and acknowledged complexity on the question of school attendance. One example comes from a widely circulated post from the *Aboriginal News Australia* Facebook page:

I'm afraid the problems are too deep for well-meaning truancy officers to address. The parents will often not be around to 'persuade'. In many cases, hugely overburdened grandmothers who give their hearts and souls to just keeping grandchildren off the drugs, out of detention and fed will be around. These women do not need persuasion. They are trying, magnificently and grandly, to get kids to school. If they can't do it, armed with love and family ties, a truancy officer won't succeed.

This post, by an anonymous contributor, looks beyond attendance figures, government policy and the RSAS to present the historical, social, cultural and emotional contexts that make school attendance difficult in some families and communities. Our research for the wider project found no evidence of mainstream reporters presenting these kinds of stories (McCallum and Waller, in press).

A second example comes from the national peak Aboriginal health body National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health

Organization (NACCHO⁸) (2017) which used its Facebook site to share strength-based materials and resources related to school attendance, including an animated series 'Little J and Big Cuz' aimed at providing a successful transition between preschool and primary school. The program is aimed at 4-6 year olds and tells the story of two children learning about their culture and the great things school has to offer with the help of their grandmother and their teacher Ms Chen. The concept underlying this media was to provide Aboriginal children with a window into the world of school with the aim of successful transition for Indigenous preschool students.

On Twitter, we looked at @IndigenousX founded by Gamilaroi man Luke Pearson in 2012. Each week a different Indigenous host shares their stories, experiences and perspectives on a new topic with more than 28,000 followers. Most importantly, it provides an online meeting place for Indigenous people to discuss issues and promote their agendas (Sweet et al., 2013). ABC journalist Bridget Brennan was a host on the @IndigenousX Twitter account in August 2014. The issue and question she posed for @IndigenousX followers: 'School attendance is a real issue for our kids: What strategies have you seen to genuinely engage kids in learning and increase attendance?' attracted comments and suggestions including: 'Giving them a voice through a restorative way of being and learning'; 'the voices of our young ppl (sic) are key to ensuring education is enjoyed not enforced'; and 'voice is really important ... but voice and influence is what really counts hey'.

From an Engoori perspective, social media content provides evidence of Indigenous people using digital platforms as a tool for allowing and encouraging all voices to be heard, enabling discussions about historical and social perspectives on school attendance, such as the *Aboriginal News Australia* Facebook page commentary, and valuing assets identified and created in the community, such as the 'Little J and Big Cuz' show.

⁸ Aboriginal communities operate 140 Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) across Australia under the umbrella of NACCHO. In keeping with the philosophy of self-determination, Aboriginal health is not just the physical wellbeing of an individual, but is the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. Promoting and supporting education is therefore important to NACCHO.

Conclusions

To conclude, our research approach has been guided by the principles of Engoori® to explore how Indigenous media disrupts hegemonic realities and foregrounds alternative agendas for Aboriginal education. Indigenous media provided tools for affected communities to resist the ‘truancy trap’ in mainstream policy and media discourses and facilitate strength-based conversations about attendance and what constitutes ‘success’ in their schools and communities. There is no suggestion that attendance is not important to Indigenous people, or that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should not go to school. Indeed, our analysis of national, commercial, community and participatory Indigenous media demonstrates that school attendance was an issue of high importance across all the Indigenous media outlets.

We emphasize here that Indigenous people work within the same broader discourses as non-Indigenous policymakers, media and public, but conduct the conversation in ways that are underpinned by cultural and local contexts, priorities and understandings. An emergent finding from the wider research suggests the wealth of Indigenous perspectives expressed via Indigenous media were not picked up or amplified by mainstream outlets (McCallum and Waller, in press). However, the narrow perspectives sponsored by mainstream news outlets were in fact challenged, broadened and reframed in mediated discussion of education in Indigenous-led media. This media analysis underlines how resilient Indigenous communities are pragmatic about government agendas and proactive when opportunities emerge to shape policy on the ground to serve their self-determined aims.

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