

CAAMA AND THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS BROADCASTING

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a cry for help from one of the world's most innovative and effective Indigenous broadcasting services, which is now in danger due to a lack of appropriate government financial support. It explains the operations of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA); describes its impressive track record of achievement over 30 years of operation; analyses the current arrangements for its funding from Government; demonstrates how these arrangements are badly designed and inadequate; and proposes an alternative approach

THE CAAMA STORY

CAAMA is the oldest Indigenous media association in the nation. It is owned and controlled by the Indigenous people of Central Australia and operates as a not-for-profit Indigenous corporation. CAAMA's focus has always been the social, cultural and economic advancement of Indigenous Australians.

The CAAMA radio service has led the way in communicating directly with Indigenous people, often in their own languages, and providing them with a voice on the nation's airwaves. CAAMA's history has been distinguished by the energy, innovation and dedication of management, staff and supporters.



CAAMA began in the 1970s as the provider of radio programs on commercial radio station 8HA, community station 8CCC-FM and ABC Radio in Alice Springs. In 1980 it won a public (community) radio licence as 8KIN FM, broadcasting first to Alice Springs and then, through a network of CAAMA- owned retransmission sites, to most of Central Australia. Now, via satellite and more than 20 local transmitters, it is licensed to operate across the entire Central Zone RA2 radio licence area (see map), and in other remote regions too.

In contrast to most Indigenous broadcasters who service relatively small regional licence areas, CAAMA delivers critical broadcast services across the largest Indigenous footprint in Australia. As well as providing a continuous service for Alice Springs and many other communities, it also acts as a mother ship, providing a professional programming bed for smaller regional Indigenous stations and Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Service (RIBS) outlets across its vast coverage area. CAAMA programming includes an extensive news and current affairs service, outside broadcasts of musical, sporting and community events and feature programs on women's affairs, health, business and enterprise development, politics, comedy and community issues.

CAAMA has always interpreted its role as a broadcaster broadly. In many ways it anticipated the media convergence occurring in radio today. CAAMA is involved in music and video production, a visitors' centre, a shop-front outlet for cultural products and has developed an extensive website

(<http://caama.com.au/>) with audio and video streaming and a lively presence on Twitter. These activities have great synergies with and have extended the impact of its radio broadcasting.

IMPACT

Such was its early impact that in 1984 the landmark *Task Force on Aboriginal Broadcasting and Communications* recommended that the CAAMA model be used all over remote Australia in the development of Indigenous broadcasting. Many Indigenous media associations, both in Australia and overseas, have drawn on the CAAMA model.

But CAAMA has not stood still. Today it provides professional broadcasting and media services to hundreds of thousands of listeners across its service area. For many CAAMA is their *primary*, sometimes *only*, broadcasting service. They depend on it for their news and information and discussion of community and cultural issues. CAAMA brings these communities into the national conversation. Through talkback, interview and request programs Indigenous voices get to air, empowering individuals and communities in the realm of electronic media, a process which is extended through CAAMA's website and online social media.

In 2010 the Australian Government's Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, paid special tribute to Indigenous radio for its connectedness to local communities. On the occasion of its 30th birthday she also praised CAAMA and wished it well for its next 30 years. Over the years CAAMA has received many awards. In 2008 it was awarded the Tony Staley Award for Excellence in Community Broadcasting by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia. It also won awards for Excellence in Digital Media for its innovative Online Radio News and for Excellence in Training.

Indigenous media training has always been a high priority for CAAMA. So far it has trained more than 800 young Indigenous people, with some trainees going on to careers in the ABC, SBS and other media organizations. However, very many CAAMA-trained broadcasters have remained in the Indigenous sector, sustaining Indigenous broadcasting right across regional and remote Australia.

MUSIC

In 1980, CAAMA staff took a mobile studio to bush communities to record bands, songs, ceremonies and gospel choirs. These early recordings were released on CAAMA's original label, Imparja Records - the first Aboriginal recording label in the country. CAAMA pioneered the recording, promotion and distribution by broadcast, cassette tape and CDs of Aboriginal music from Central Australia and beyond. It has produced more than 800 recordings in 15 Aboriginal languages. CAAMA Music has transmitted live outside broadcasts and studio performances across the CAAMA Radio footprint and CAAMA recordings comprise about 60% of Aboriginal music broadcast on radio stations nationally.

VIDEO

CAAMA has seeded, often without additional funding, major advances in Indigenous media. Its role in video production and training has been fundamental in the development of the Indigenous screen industry. Filmmakers including Rachel Perkins (*Bran Nue Dae*) and Warwick Thornton (*Sampson and Delilah*) were CAAMA trainees and its video productions have won many awards. Critically, CAAMA initiated and fostered the Indigenous TV service, Imparja Television.

Through CAAMA's own extensive operations and its wider encouragement, training and support for Indigenous media initiatives, the task of closing the gap between the life circumstances of Indigenous and other Australians becomes more achievable.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Today broadcasting is on the brink of its historic next step: into digital communications. CAAMA, given its credentials as an Indigenous broadcasting innovator, should be poised to contribute strongly. Instead, CAAMA is just holding on, seriously concerned about its ability to survive.

The economic realities of Indigenous broadcasting are stark. CAAMA's audiences are mostly poor and disadvantaged. 8KIN-FM has limited attraction for commercial advertisers. In the past year the station generated about \$220,000 from airtime sales, mostly from sponsored campaigns by government service providers. CAAMA has worked exceedingly hard to develop diverse sources of income, successfully securing funds for projects from a wide range of government and other organisations. But this project-by-project funding is unreliable. In the financial year 2008/09, for example, it amounted to \$671,000; in 2009/10, it was \$206,000.

CAAMA has managed its own assets in an enterprising way. For example, it recently concluded an attractive long-term lease agreement for vacant property. Over the years it has also established commercial subsidiaries, including CAAMA Shops and CAAMA Productions, to generate profits for the organisation. However CAAMA's status as a community-owned corporation has not always sat easily with the running of proprietary companies, and there has been some criticism of the resultant corporate relationships within the CAAMA Group. It should be noted, however, that very many not for profit and publicly owned organisations with commercial subsidiaries, including the BBC and the Reserve Bank of Australia, have found this sort of balancing act a challenge. CAAMA has acted to address these issues. For example, management has been working hard to establish a robust system of transfer pricing between different entities to ensure principles of good governance in this situation are met.

The net returns from CAAMA's commercial enterprises have been modest, partly as a result of the lack of capital investment and the unique marketplace challenges facing Indigenous products. But the community service focus of CAAMA has also played a role. As noted earlier, CAAMA invested very considerable effort and resources into the establishment of the Central Australian commercial TV licensee Imparja because it was an important initiative for Indigenous broadcasting. It remains a 68% shareholder in this enterprise. However, Imparja Television has Benevolent Institution status and thus returns no dividends back to CAAMA.

CAAMA and its fellow Indigenous media associations provide a mission-driven public service – a primary broadcasting service to Indigenous Australians. They are not commercial or even community broadcasters (see below). As with the national public service broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, they can only operate effectively if they have access to stable, core funding from the public purse.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

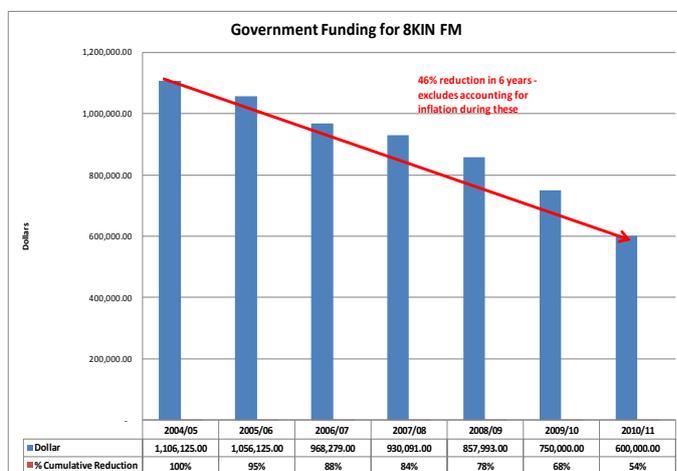
Until recent years CAAMA was able to rely on relatively stable funding arrangements administered by the broadcasting development program of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission (ATSIC). This funding was never enough to fully support CAAMA's activities but it was extremely important, especially because it recognised:

- that CAAMA's responsibilities and impact extended geographically well beyond the provision of a single community radio service in Alice Springs;
- that the organisation had built a range of broadcasting-related activities, including music production, training and technical support, that greatly enriched its value and effectiveness as a broadcaster; and
- that CAAMA (and other Indigenous broadcasters) would only be able to survive and plan for the future if funding from the program broadly covered core operational costs on a predictable and ongoing basis.

In public sector finance terms this was 'base' funding, designed to sustain CAAMA's core operations. In addition there was some flexibility under the program to apply for additional one-off funding to help meet specific unforeseen costs. Urgent capital equipment maintenance and replacement could be addressed in this way. During this period CAAMA received around \$1.1 million base funding each year from ATSIC under this scheme. However, in 2004 all ATSIC's operations ceased to exist.

CURRENT FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

Since July 2004 the principal source of funding for CAAMA has been the Australian Government's Indigenous Broadcasting Program (IBP) administered first by the Department of Communications,



Information Technology and the Arts and in the past three years by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. Currently, CAAMA receives an annual grant through the IBP. This is the only source of funds within government to support CAAMA's core, ongoing activities. However, in the past six years funds provided through the IBP for CAAMA's own operations have been reduced by 46% (see table). The reduction is a much larger figure if adjusted for inflation over the period.

The IBP's current policy is one of "seeking to achieve equity in provision of funds to similar organisations when assessing applications". However, this level playing field approach fails to recognise significant differences in service levels, program distribution, technical assistance and broadcast licence area between 'similar organisations'.

IMPACT ON CAAMA

The progressive and ongoing reduction of base funding is having a devastating effect on CAAMA's operations. Most administrative support positions have been removed from the station. Training programs have been cut to the bone, retarding both the ongoing skilling of young Indigenous people and reducing the number of willing hands available for production support. Staff are undertaking fewer field trips and recording of music for broadcast has almost ceased.

CAAMA is not funded for any capital equipment, either at the 8KIN-FM station or in local communities. Lack of funding is creating OH&S issues at transmitter sites. Although CAAMA receives separate funding to support RIBS organisations, it receives none for its own services at Ceduna, Coober Pedy, Tennant Creek, Elliot and Katherine. It is becoming impossible for CAAMA to support, operationally and technically, the other Indigenous broadcasters in its immense coverage area - support that has been relied upon in these communities as a matter of course.

CAAMA is aware that many other Indigenous media organisations are also under pressure. It seems that our organisation and the whole Indigenous radio sector is slowly but relentlessly being pushed backwards. CAAMA does not believe that a conscious policy decision has been made within government that Australia's pioneering and much lauded role in fostering and supporting Indigenous development through broadcasting should be wound back. Rather, we believe that the funding, design and administration of the IBP is entirely inappropriate and dysfunctional in relation to the activity which it purports to sustain.

THE IBP IS NOT WORKING

The Indigenous Broadcasting Program's stated aim is to: "strengthen and support Indigenous broadcasters so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access culturally appropriate and regionally relevant broadcasting services in the same way the wider Australian public does". However in its current form the program cannot achieve its stated goal, as its dealings with CAAMA illustrate.

One of the reasons is that the IBP seems to be designed to operate like an arts project fund, rather than as a program which supports ongoing operating services. In addition, it seems to assume that Indigenous broadcasting shares the characteristics of stations in the general community broadcasting sector. This appears to have led the IBP to believe it can achieve its objectives by providing 'top-up' funding that is unpredictable and dwindles each year as a growing number of Indigenous communities seek support. This may be an appropriate approach to funding arts projects, whereby if the funds are not sufficient, the project simply does not happen. Or to contributing to a special interest community radio station which is run by volunteers and has subscribers, financial donors and considerable commercial sponsorship to fall back on. Such an approach is not valid in the Indigenous broadcasting sector.

This 'top-up' mentality is also presumably the reason why, under the program, there is no flexibility to seek support for urgent capital needs, unlike the ATSIC funding program that preceded it. Or why there is little advance notice of the amount of funding likely to be available each year, making it near impossible for the station to do any long-term planning. For CAAMA, IBP support is not top-up funding. It represents the core operational resource that the Indigenous broadcaster has always depended on to operate. Without this resource, CAAMA cannot survive.

More broadly, the IBP assumption that funding support for CAAMA, and other Indigenous broadcasters, is somehow discretionary and will not endanger basic operations, leads the program to employ a range of inappropriate concepts in its guidelines for funding applications.

Applicants are informed that this application process for funds is 'highly competitive'. Competition for funding between mendicant Indigenous broadcasters around the nation to secure core funding to maintain vital services is a strange concept, especially when the services they provide are not comparable. Finite IBP resources may need to be shared and qualifying applicants may all receive less funding than they would like. But the concept that they are in competition is wrong-headed in the extreme.

IBP funding is also narrowly targeted on a particular conception of radio operations. A distinguishing characteristic of the Indigenous broadcasting sector, and one of its great strengths, is the linkages that Indigenous media associations make between radio broadcasting and related media and communications activities. Resources that are taken for granted in other sectors of broadcasting often are simply not available for Indigenous broadcasters or their audiences. Culturally relevant music is an example. As we described above, CAAMA has become highly skilled in identifying, recording and broadcasting local Indigenous musicians. However, this activity has ceased due to lack of funding because the IBP guidelines do not recognise music production as a component of radio broadcasting. Equally, a strong website, incorporating audio, video and social media elements, is now universally recognised throughout the radio industry as an indispensable companion platform for radio. However, the IBP fails to recognise that these activities are now part of the business of radio making. The need for CAAMA to invest in training in order to prepare its broadcasters of the future also remains unrecognised in the IBP funding framework, unless the organisation is itself a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). As a consequence key training programs once conducted by CAAMA have ceased.

It could be argued that it is because of these assumptions (and others like them) that the overall quantum of funding available in the IBP has not grown for many years. Why would government worry too much about the size of a 'top-up' fund that is applied narrowly to radio broadcasting and is (wrongly) believed not to affect too much the basic viability of those who apply to it for funds? Indigenous broadcasting funding totalled \$12.97 million in 1999/2000 - in support of 35 media organisations. In 2010/11 the IBP has funding of \$14.7 million to support 44 organisations. During this period the aggregate CPI increase was around 24%. There has therefore been a massive funding

reduction for an industry that is seeking to expand and deepen its crucial role in addressing the very great problems of Indigenous people and their communities in Australia.

In summary, then, we believe the current Indigenous Broadcasting Program:

- is based on misplaced assumptions about the sector, including the extent of alternative sources of base funding for Indigenous media associations;
- employs inappropriate concepts whereby applicants are required to compete against each other for funds, irrespective of the geographical extent and wider broadcasting, training and support obligations each might have;
- is too narrowly focused on radio broadcasting, given the contemporary convergent media environment; and
- is very seriously under-resourced in real terms, given the growth of the sector over the years the IBP has operated.

POLICY VACUUM

CAAMA believes a policy vacuum has developed as to how Indigenous broadcasting should be encouraged and supported by the Australian Government. There are confusion about whether Indigenous broadcasting is like public service broadcasting for Indigenous Australia or is simply a part of the volunteer-driven community broadcasting sector; and whether support measures should be like project funds in the arts or should be dedicated operational support that is stable and reliable over time. In any case, as we have demonstrated, the current dominant vehicle for support, the IBP, is entirely inadequate for the purpose. If current arrangements to support Indigenous broadcasting continue, confusion, misunderstanding and failure will only grow, to the detriment of the sector and the efficient and effective use of the public funds that are invested in it. It is time to start again.

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

CAAMA believes the Australian Government should persist with the wide-ranging, independent Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Review announced by the then government in July 2010. We believe Review members should consult widely regarding a new framework for the support of Indigenous broadcasting and media organisations in Australia. In particular, we believe the review should recognise:

- that Indigenous broadcasting will continue to be a key driver in closing the gap between Indigenous and other Australians;
- that Indigenous broadcasting is a primary broadcasting service for Indigenous Australians and is more akin to a national broadcasting service than a licensed community broadcaster;
- that Indigenous broadcasting organisations require adequate and stable funding in order to survive and develop their services;
- that this core support is probably best administered under the auspices of the department of government that manages policy and programs relating to broadcasting, including national broadcasting, rather than a department responsible for the arts;
- that a national governance and funding framework for Indigenous broadcasting needs to be developed which reflects both the knowledge and experience of long-established regional media associations as well as broader, nationwide interests; and
- that collaboration and cooperation, rather than competition in the deployment of resources, is the best way to build an effective Indigenous broadcasting system for Australia.

CAAMA is happy to discuss any aspect of this paper at any time.

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