

Community Dialogues: Aboriginal Australians, Oral Tradition, and Community Radio

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Abstract: This article is based on oral history interviews with Indigenous Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders, and Pacific Islanders in Australia who have become actively involved in producing, hosting, and performing on local community radio stations throughout the country. Using the model that I established in examining media usage within the tri-racial Melungeon community of Appalachia, this work expands my oral history research to include other “outsider” communities. My research with the Melungeons explored how they have used communications technology to redefine their individual and community identities by creating their own Websites and “virtual” communities. Similarly, my oral history interviews with Aboriginal people in Australia have focused on how they use technologies such as community radio to redefine identities and communities in ways that help them advocate for social justice and insure community survival. Like the Melungeons, the Aboriginal and Indigenous people of Australia have strong oral traditions. My research suggests that the interrelationship of oral tradition and technology has revolutionary potential for social change in Aboriginal communities involved in the creation of community radio. More broadly, by using oral history methodologies to compare this interrelationship among the Melungeons and Aboriginal peoples, this project seeks to illuminate processes of continuity and change in the construction of identities in “outsider” communities. In addition, this article examines the economic difficulties raised by some of the indigenous people interviewed while I was in Australia.

Keywords: Community, radio, indigenous, Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders, Pacific Islanders, Australia, oral tradition, political agency, memory, politics.

1. Introduction

In the past, my research has concentrated on electronic media usage in rural Appalachia as I examined how the arrival of radio, television, and the Internet affected the lives of people in this mountainous region of the U.S.A. In this article I take a comparative look at electronic media usage between Indigenous Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders, and Pacific Islanders in Australia and the Melungeon community of Appalachia. In addition, this work will address the methodological and economic concerns encountered while conducting this study.

The oral histories I have collected create a valuable human diary that documents the importance of radio in rural communities. Similarly, oral histories tracing the early adoption

of the Internet also contribute to a better understanding of how Melungeons¹, a tri-racial community in rural Appalachia that historically has been perceived as “other,” were able to use electronic media to redefine their individual and community identities— both virtually and in real life — despite their geographical isolation.

In this study, I reflect upon how my work is situated within a global paradigm. Using the model that I have established in examining media usage within the Melungeon community of Appalachia, this article explores the broader issue of electronic media usage in “outsider” communities.

2. Site of Study

I conducted original research for this study in Australia. Specifically, I conducted oral history interviews with twenty-two Indigenous Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders, and Pacific Islanders in Australia who have become actively involved in producing, hosting, and performing on local community radio stations throughout the country.

An earlier aspect of my research with the Melungeons was based on how they have used communications technology to redefine their community by creating their own Websites. Similarly, my interviews with Aboriginal Peoples in Australia focused on how they use technologies such as community radio to redefine identities and communities in ways that help them advocate for social justice and ensure community survival. Like the Melungeons, the Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples of Australia have strong oral traditions. My research suggests that the interrelationship of oral tradition and technology has revolutionary potential for social change in Aboriginal communities involved in the creation of community radio. More broadly, by using oral history methodologies to compare this interrelationship among the Melungeons and Aboriginal peoples, my project seeks to illuminate processes of continuity and change in the construction of identities in “outsider” communities.

In thinking about the future of media and technology in this age of global media conglomeration, it is important to recognize the role radio has played in rural communities. For nearly a century, radio’s power to bring audiences with similar interests together, has been immeasurable (Olorunnisola, 1997; Poindexter, 1997; Podber, 2001; Rockwell, 2001). Contrary to the “lonely crowd” theory, where electronic media were sometimes looked upon as isolating forces on society, the inception of radio in Appalachia, for example, appeared to enhance rather than disrupt family and community cohesion (Riesman, 2001). In addition to getting out of the house to attend church on Sundays and prayer meetings on Wednesday nights, going to a friend’s or neighbor’s house on Saturday night to listen to the “Grand Ole Opry” on the radio became a big event in the lives of many participants who were interviewed. Moreover, the

¹ The second edition of Webster’s Dictionary describes a Melungeon as “a member of a dark-skinned people of mixed Caucasian, Negro, and Indian stock, inhabiting the Tennessee mountains.” There is, however, a great deal of mythology surrounding Melungeon identity. For instance, one legend contends that the original Melungeons were escaped slaves or mutineers from African/Portuguese boats that jumped ship while approaching the Southeastern seaboard of North America and fled to the Tennessee mountains to hide.

ability of residents to identify strongly with regional country music programs such as WNOX's "Midday Merry-Go-Round" broadcast from Knoxville, Tennessee, emphasizes the importance of local radio programming, which is equally important when examining Indigenous and Aboriginal community stations (Podber, 2007).

3. Melungeon, Indigenous and Aboriginal Australian Identity

When beginning this study, I had not fully considered many of the issues that would surface during my interviews with Indigenous and Aboriginal Australians. Most importantly, I had given thought to the similarities between the two groups but not necessarily the differences. To start, in looking at race during my initial interviews with the tri-racial group of Melungeons in Appalachia, it immediately became apparent that many of the participants gladly embraced their Native American genealogy while avoiding any mention of African heritage. Not surprisingly, the number of Americans who identify with American Indians on US census forms has risen 259 percent from 1960 to 1990 (Wright, 1994). Promises of entitlement from the federal government and America's move toward a more positive attitude concerning minorities are likely reasons for this increase. Similar issues about government entitlements were raised among the Indigenous people I interviewed in Australia, although, as in the USA, government entitlements are often stigmatized. Lexine Solomon explained that:

If they recognize or accept or claim it (Aboriginality), it could mean that their career escalates, they become more successful if that's what they're aiming for out of it, so that happens a lot of times. I mean people readily say, oh you know they just claimed Aboriginality because you know it means they're gonna get more money or they'll get a promotion out of it (L. Solomon, personal oral history interview, August 4, 2006).

In Appalachia, Barbara Langdon spoke of her great-grandfather being a Native American Cherokee and how her mother and sisters always spoke about it (B. Langdon, personal oral history interview, May 4, 2000). Nancy Sparks Morrison also spoke of having Native American ancestry: "I had a grandmother, a great-grandmother who I knew. She said that she was quarter strain Indian, I think she said Cherokee" (N.S. Morrison, personal oral history interview, April 3, 2000). As Seven Gibson drove me around Newman's Ridge (outside of Sneedville, Tennessee, an area with a large Melungeon population), pointing out legendary landmarks on the Melungeon heritage trail, I casually questioned him on Melungeon ethnicity. He explained that there was some misunderstanding on the issue of race. He felt that the "black" component stemmed from the Black Hawk War or some other Native American connection (S. Gibson, personal oral history interview, April 5, 2000).

In fact, the word "black" was often used euphemistically when participants spoke of their ancestry. Barbara Langdon explains: "They would say they were Black Dutch or Black Irish, or French, or Native American. They'd say they were anything but Melungeon because anything else would be better...because to be Melungeon was to be discriminated against" (B. Langdon, personal oral history interview, May 4, 2000).

Seldom would a participant even recall hearing the word Melungeon in connection with

their family heritage. As Judy Bill remembered, “We thought we were Black Dutch. We were told we were. My great grandfather said he was Black Dutch and he said his father was Black Dutch.” When I asked Judy what that meant, she replied, “Nobody ever knew, nobody knows today. There’s no such thing as Black Dutch I’ve learned, you know, so if I’m not Black Dutch, what in the world was I and it turned out I’ve got Melungeon connections. But, no, there’s no such thing as Black Dutch” (J. Bill, personal oral history interview, April 3, 2000).

In my interviews with Indigenous Australians, there were also some families that did not discuss their heritage. For example, Lexine Solomon explained that “It happens all the time, there are people who were raised and never acknowledged their Aboriginality, as it’s called here” (L. Solomon, personal oral history interview, August 4, 2006). However, Heather May’s mother proudly spoke of her Indigenous background,

When I was a little kid we always knew. I don’t know why my mother spoke because my relatives that live in the country areas, they didn’t talk about it, but for some reason my mother told us. I don’t know whether it’s because we lived in the city or whether she was just different and just said, but we always knew that we, the term was, we had Aboriginal blood (H. May, personal oral history interview, July 20, 2006).

When asked how that made her feel, Heather responded,

Actually, it made me feel special, like I was a little kid when I heard this. I don’t know how, but for whatever reason. I didn’t really know what that meant but I felt I’ve got Aboriginal blood in me [giggle], [and that always] stuck with me. Like this kid doesn’t have a concept of what it means but it can be something to them, maybe, I don’t know why it made me feel special [giggle]” (ibid).

In Appalachia, there were names other than Melungeon that were associated with the group, many of which could be construed as negative. However, Mattie Ruth Johnson was careful to distinguish between Melungeons and African-Americans: “There were some around that obviously was darker skinned and I know one or two that was very dark. They did not have any Negro features whatsoever, but a lot of them were dark-skinned. They looked more Indian maybe or could be more Portuguese as we’re finding out now” (M. R. Johnson, personal oral history interview, April 3, 2000). This last statement begs the question, what does a Portuguese look like?

It appears that some Melungeons could not identify themselves as being part African, but still found it necessary to associate their identity with some outsider group. It even became necessary to invent a group such as the “Black Dutch” rather than identify with the unequivocal “other” within American society. As Barker (1999) informs us, “Identities are wholly social constructions and cannot ‘exist’ outside of cultural representations...identity is not an already existent ‘fixed thing,’ a possession of the self; rather, identity is a constitutive description of the self in language” (p. 31).

The external derogatory constructions of Melungeon identity were paralleled in some participants’ words by evidence of internalized marginality. Campbell says that today we live

in a demythologized world, and as a result, we make up myths ourselves (Campbell, 1988). Given the discrimination experienced by some Melungeons, specifically as “people of color,” it is not surprising that a socially constructed mythology was established (Podber, 2007).

Interestingly, in speaking with Indigenous Australians, skin color was repeatedly mentioned as *not* being a decisive identifier when speaking about heritage. As Lexine Solomon explained,

Well, really it doesn't matter about the color of the skin or how, whatever shade it might be. I've got an auntie who believes that there are eleven shades of black and some of it comes from a very white color to a very black color, um, now what really matters is that an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander person has support from their community, where they're from, to show that they are actually, um, claiming, you know, their class, or their race, or their culture” (L. Solomon, personal oral history interview, July 25, 2006).

Lola Forester concurred, “How we identify as Aboriginal, is not a thing of color. It's what's inside you and um, also being part of a community and um, being accepted in that community (L. Forester, personal oral history interview, July 25, 2006).

In the USA, where the color of one's skin continues to trump class, this distinction was glaring. However, as Forester and Solomon noted above, a significant issue when discussing Aboriginal identity is acceptance into a clan or community. In order to get government entitlements, some spoke of needing a letter of support from one's community or clan. This tension between Aboriginal self-identification with a clan or community and the national government's identification requirements, raised concern by some with whom I spoke. As Lola Forester put it,

For Aboriginal people to get money from the government, we have a letter of identification, like someone from uh, the Third World who carries a certificate of identification. So, as an Aboriginal person, if you want to get government grants, all that, you have to seek out an Aboriginal organization that will uh, write a letter on your behalf and say uh, I have known Lola Forester for so many years. She is of Aboriginal background and you know, she is part of the community.

So it's pretty hard to, even though a lot of non-Aboriginal people think that we get special treatment and that we get everything for nothing, it is actually even harder.... A lot of young people carry around letters in their, in their resumes, or in their wallets to just stipulate that they are of Aboriginal background.

So I think it's really a demeaning thing because [giggle] it's like we're living in the twenty-first century and people have to walk around and say, well I am Aboriginal and this is my certificate (L. Forester, personal oral history interview, July 25, 2006).

As with the Melungeons of Appalachia, Indigenous Australian self-identification is of crucial importance when examining identity (O'Dowd, 2009). Berger and Luckmann (1966) say identity is formed by social process, that it is “a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (p. 160). But Hollinger (1995) challenges us with

his post-ethnic perspective: "Individuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to an extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever non-descent communities are available and appealing to them" (p. 116).

4. Reflexivity

It is important to recognize that this project is a qualitative study and since reflexivity is a vital element in qualitative studies, I feel compelled to examine my own identity as a researcher and my relationship to the participants in this study.

Of course, I recognize that as a white urbanite male doing interpretive research within a marginalized group, I might raise some eyebrows. There is some discussion within the academy as to whether it is even possible for an "outsider" to record a community's history effectively. So who was I to think that I could go into rural Appalachian communities and Indigenous and Aboriginal communities and extract significant oral histories?

During my research trips to Appalachia, I was often amazed by the ease with which I was able to find participants willing to share their stories with me. I believe this was partially because of having grown up in Atlanta, Georgia and the fact that I still think of myself as a southerner even though I have lived most of my adult life in New York, London, and Los Angeles. Of course, growing up in Atlanta may have made me southern, but this did not make me an Appalachian (Podber, 2007).

As stated earlier, I had given thought to the similarities between Appalachian Melungeons and Aboriginal and Indigenous Australians, but not necessarily the differences. For example, on my arrival in Australia, it was immediately evident that Indigenous and Aboriginal Australian identity was far more constructed than that of the Melungeon community. Most participants in Australia proudly spoke of which "clan" they belonged to and what region of the country their people were from.

I also had to recognize that I was more of an outsider in Australia than I had been in the Appalachian Mountains of the US. As a result, it was far more difficult to find Indigenous and Aboriginal Australians willing to discuss their electronic media usage with a US media researcher. I therefore began contacting Indigenous and Aboriginal community radio stations in hopes of finding participants. This resulted in interviews with producers, performers, and general managers of Aboriginal community stations.

5. Radio in Australia

One theme that was repeated during many of my interviews with Indigenous and Aboriginal community radio producers and performers was how strongly they felt about projecting a positive image. Brian Dennison spoke about his own program on Aboriginal community radio: "I said we set up for a particular purpose... promoting the good things and positive things that happen in our community, so it's, it's centered around promoting what Aboriginal people do good, whether it'd be through sports or education or through music" (B. Dennison, personal

oral history interview, August 4th, 2006). Brad Cooke, general manager of Gadigal Information Service Aboriginal Corporation (which runs Koori² Radio, a community station in Sydney), also stressed the mission of his station. It's "to spread the word about positive things, fight the negative stereotype, and entertain at the same time...." (B. Cooke, personal oral history interview, July 18, 2006).

Lola Forester, one of the original Aboriginal broadcasters in Australia, hosts a show every Wednesday for the national indigenous radio service that is picked up by community radio stations throughout the country. During our interview, she stressed that "our program looks at issues that affect us, we try to do the positive side of Aboriginal Australia" (L. Forester, personal oral history interview, July 25, 2006).

The similarity of these comments made me reflect on how I had constructed my research project as a comparative exercise between Indigenous and Aboriginal Australian radio producers and performers and members of the Melungeon community in Appalachia who were actively involved in Melungeon Internet Web site construction. It wasn't until I returned from Australia and started reviewing my transcripts that I realized that I had partially, yet inadvertently framed myself as a radio producer rather than simply a researcher when talking to Indigenous radio producers in Australia. When I created the release form that I asked Australian participants to sign, I stressed that I might use their interviews on an NPR (National Public Radio) type radio or Internet program. I did this largely because my earlier Appalachian interview recordings were adequate for transcribing but not clear enough for a broadcast radio project that had been proposed by a colleague. When in Australia, however, I used a digital recorder, stopped recording if there were any distracting background noises, and if recording in a radio station, asked to do the interview in the soundproof broadcasting booth. This led many of the participants to assume they were being interviewed not primarily for a research project, but for US radio. As a result, I believe participants were self-conscious of how I, an outsider, would be judging them, not to mention how the US radio audience would perceive them.

This led me to further reflect on issues of authenticity and identity among the different groups in my study. Firstly, I recognized that my first interviews in Australia were with Indigenous Australian radio producers and performers, as opposed to Indigenous Australian radio listeners. The power of my previous interviews on electronic media usage in rural Appalachia centered on how everyday Appalachians used the Internet in contrast to radio producers whose role is to serve the public good.

In my examination of Melungeon Internet usage, I recognized how they had been historically defined geographically, living in isolated pockets in central Appalachia. At the same time, Melungeon identity has, in the past, been culturally constructed by "outsiders" as negative. Today, however, Melungeons are beginning to embrace their diversity. Through their involvement with the Internet, they are becoming the authors of Web sites that define their identity. These Web sites create the opportunity for the Melungeon community to reach out beyond its geographical borders and construct its own identity in a positive way (Podber, 2007).

² Koori is the native name of the local Indigenous and Aboriginal people in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

The Melungeon use of the Internet seems to point to a more egalitarian and accessible electronic public sphere than is possible with traditional radio. In *The Public Sphere*, Habermas views democracy as representing a social space wherein members of the society can rationally debate issues. The Habermasian view of the public sphere was inspired by the literary movement and revealed itself in salons and coffeehouses where the average citizen could discuss socio-political issues. Although the bourgeois public sphere was marked by gender and class exclusion, Habermas's ideal public sphere was egalitarian in principle (Habermas, 1989). This concept of the public sphere illuminates Internet usage in Appalachia. For example, on the Melungeon listserv issues of gender, age, and race need not have an impact on the topic being discussed (if the writer chooses not to reveal his or her physical identity). Newsgroups and listservs offer any subscriber a chance to express his or her ideas without prejudice arising from anything other than what is written. However, a person with a lower educational level might be betrayed by improper use of spelling and grammar. As a result, this person might be taken less seriously in virtual groups. But, technology, such as automatic grammar and spell-checking software, can level the playing field, leading to a more egalitarian and accessible electronic public sphere (Podber, 2007).

A complicating issue that arises when looking at Indigenous and Aboriginal communities is that, unlike Melungeons who are from a specific geographical region of Appalachia, Aboriginal Australians live throughout the country/continent, and each "clan" has its own unique identity. Furthermore, unlike the Internet, which is not as widely available to Indigenous Australians as it is to members of the Melungeon community, community radio is a more traditional medium that does not incorporate the interactivity of the Internet. However, even though radio is a top-down medium, many Aboriginal radio producers and performers attempt to overcome radio's non-interactive capabilities by introducing telephone call-ins from community members (see Molnar, 1990). Brad Cooke, general manager of Koori Radio, talks about call-in listeners to his station. "[T]hey really enjoying making their regular shout outs to their friends and families and community and people [by] giving a call-in.... When people call in to our station, to put on a request uhm, the phone's answered by the presenter every time, you're speaking to the presenter. 'What would you like to say, we'll put you on air.'" (B. Cooke, personal oral history interview, July 18, 2006). Cooke accommodates even those too shy to talk on the radio:

Half of our people are too shy to do that. 'No, no, no, don't put me on air...I don't wanna be on the air.' So, we would write down their name and we would say that for them. People can't believe that we're so available to them. And that's a really big thing we're trying to break down, [to] let people know they've got a voice, if they wanna use it. And if they want us to use their voice for them, we'll do it, we're happy to do it" (ibid).

Bumma Bippera, the Indigenous community radio station serving the Cairns, Australia region, also encourages interactivity by promoting call-ins from listeners during their "Black is Black" issues-oriented program. However, similar to the issue of accessibility to the Web in rural Appalachia, Ken Reys (Chief Executive Officer of Bumma Bippera Media) calls attention to dire economic issues in the Indigenous and Aboriginal communities: "You might have a lot

of Aboriginal Torres Strait Island people listening [and] Pacific Islanders listening, but they can't afford to ring you. Half of the time, I hear these excuses, 'I never had a credit on my phone... I couldn't afford to ring you, to make a request. I couldn't afford to ring you...to, to do the talk back and speak my mind' (K. Reys, personal oral history interview, July 26, 2006).

As is all too often the case when examining electronic media usage in "outsider" communities, the issue of media access cannot be overlooked (see Meadows & Molnar, 2002). In many rural communities throughout the world, including the Indigenous communities outside of Cairns, Australia, cellular phone service has replaced the need for telephonic landlines. Yet, many of the residents in Indigenous and Aboriginal communities throughout Australia simply cannot afford monthly cell phone access fees. As Lola Forester put it, "We need help, we need a revolution here.... if you ain't got technology how are you... gonna work...? [I]t's really, really sad, we're like the crown jewels here, we're the oldest continuous living culture in the world, and this government and the people in this country have no respect for that (L. Forester, personal oral history interview, July 25, 2006).

6. Conclusion

In reviewing my transcripts, I recognize that issues of authenticity, identity, and reflexivity are quite complex and require further distillation. It appears that the differences between the two groups and their uses of media for technological and social empowerment appear to be more different than similar. Furthermore, because of the problems encountered in accessing participants in the Indigenous and Aboriginal community, most of my detailed interviews were with Aboriginal radio producers and performers, as opposed to Indigenous radio listeners.

Nevertheless, the most striking problem uncovered in my research is the dire economic state that so many of the participants in the Indigenous and Aboriginal communities of Australia continue to face in the new millennium. I would argue that relatively easy access to community radio had insured its continuation, despite media deregulation, consolidation, and convergence. However, as interactive media usage surges in developing areas of the globe, one cannot overlook "outsider" communities that continue to struggle with issues of limited access.

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