

## **The Aboriginal invention of technology: from computers to mobile phones.**

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How we going to use this technology to work for us and for us to use it the way we want to use it- not technology using us (Taylor 2011)

In May 2001 the UNESCO Symposium on *Indigenous Identities: Oral, Written Expressions and New Technologies* (15-18 May 2001) convened by Professor Barbara Glowczewski, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique was held in Paris. The symposium focused on the safeguarding, transmission and mutation of indigenous cultures and the potential benefits of new technologies (UNESCO 2001). Glowczewski called on anthropologists to not only return the data collected in the field from Aboriginal communities, but for a “reinterpretation” of this data in such a way that it can be “used for learning, transmission and pleasure through aesthetics or entertainment, as well as for spiritual fulfilment, in a critical and ethical process” (Glowczewski 2005, p. 24).

Over the last 20 years the return of data to Aboriginal communities has taken place, initially delivered in hardcopy formats. With the advent of new technologies, the Internet and digitisation of cultural collections Aboriginal communities, art galleries and museums in Australia have collaborated in the digital return of materials and the development of local community digital archives. In a keynote address delivered at the UNESCO Symposium, Professor Marcia Langton said:

The new technologies allow Indigenous users to instantly express cultural values to large audiences and, at the same time, to claim the cultural authority to exercise cultural freedom dynamically, saying new things to new audiences, free of the old colonial restrictions. In contrast, the restrictive paradigms of European representations of Indigenous cultures have consistently deemed them to be marginal [and] frozen in time (Langton 2001).

With the advent of new information technologies, Aboriginal people are now seeking the return of documents, photographs and film from institutions around the globe to populate their local digital archives, as a way of conserving traditional knowledge and

social, family and local histories. The use of information technology to deliver content to local community members is done as a way of preserving and transmitting knowledge to future generations. Archives in historical institutions such as museums, government agencies and national archives, offer information that supports the construction of personal and community identity and the social life and shared memories of communities (Healy 2008; Ormond-Parker & Sloggett 2012)

### **The Mulka Multimedia Centre, Yirrkala**

In 1935, the township of Yirrkala was established, in North East Arnhem land approximately 700km east of Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia. Since the beginning of the mission, Yolngu people have been involved in sharing their stories, song, dance and traditions with the outside world and have been recorded in photographs, painting, sound recording on film and their material cultural has been stored in museums and art galleries around Australia and the World. The Mulka Multimedia Project was born out of the foresight out of the Elders. In 2007 with money raised from the sale of artworks, the community established a multimedia archive and built a local public cinema and multi-media centre (Lane et al. 2010; Ormond-Parker & Sloggett 2012).

The Mulka Project's purpose is to create new and interesting ways for traditional knowledge, culture, language, song, dance and ceremony to be transmitted to future generations by engaging in learning about their recorded histories stored in museums, galleries and libraries around the world. The Mulka Project has tracked material down in institutions and sought the return of materials relevant to Yolngu people.

In 2001 Marrnyula Munungurr's created a linocut, *Jobs in remote communities*, and combined her usual acute observation, with her distinctive graphic style grounded in bark painting, to depict rows of Yolngu and Balanda sitting on swiveling office chairs at glowing computer screens, fingers on the keyboard entering data.



Figure 1. Marnnyula Munungurr, Screenprint, *Jobs in remote communities*

NEW IMAGE TO BE SUPPLIED

In 2009–10 Yolngu leader, Dr Joe Gumbula’s curated his first exhibition, Makarr-Garma, at The University of Sydney’s Macleay Museum, in which photographs and objects were displayed from the collection. Dr Gumbula as part of his research collaborated with the museum and the photos were made available to Yolngu communities at Milinjibi and Galiwin’ku “for learning, discussion and refinement of their descriptions, and for stimulating new awareness of Arnhem Land’s recent history.” (Gumbula, Corn & Mant 2013, p. 204). The Mulka Project’s Cultural Director, Mr. Wukun Wanambi has worked to bring back digital materials of significance to the community. Digital copies of returned material such as film, audio recording, documents and photographs are stored on local computers for community access. The Mulka Project is not only concerned with the collection of digitised materials held in public and private institutions around Australia but also it focuses on the contemporary recording of local events (Lane 2011; Ormond-Parker 2009).



Figure 2. Mulka Project Cultural Director Wukun Wanambi and Deputy Chair Yumitjin Wunungmurra in the Australian Museum storage stacks Sydney. Photograph by Rob Lane

The Mulka Project has a program of engaging and training community members in the use of new technology, training people in filming, photography, editing, database development and production on in-house DVDs and CDs. The Mulka Project prides itself on high quality production values, in terms of the technology and works on a variety of formats or platforms. The Internet is an important tool for the Mulka Centre to distribute video and audio (<http://www.mulka.org/themulkaproject>). They utilize commercially available software such as iTunes to deliver important community content locally from audiovisual archives. Along with smart phones, DVDs play an important role in the community because DVD players and CD players are more popular in the community than computers (Lane 2010; Lane et al. 2010).

Working at Mulka you learn both media production and Yolngu law. We show the kids how old people fight for country with painting, song and dance. Us young people have to follow their footsteps and learn what the old people have done for us to keep their dreams flowing. My songs, my culture, my land is in the song lines, it tells my story. The knowledge in the songs needs to be studied and practiced, so that I can pass it on to my kids, and their kids. I listen to the audio recordings so I'm ready to lead my family and sing at ceremony, says Mulka Centre staff member, Ishmael Marika. (Lane 2011, p. 83)

In the photograph database, which is made available to the community via public access computers at the Mulka Centre, places and faces are very important. People search for either *faces* or *places* and the images exported out of the database are used for exhibitions, postcards, business cards, posters and photographic reproductions (Lane 2010).

We are using the technology to learn our own culture and then also learning at the same time how to use the computer to edit and document videos (V. Gambley, personal communications, August 8, 2010).



Figure 3. Mickey at the Mulka Centre Photograph Rob Lane

### **Mobile Phones and Messaging**

Mobile technologies, especially prepaid mobiles, are the preferred communication method for young people in regional and remote Aboriginal communities, and will become increasingly important as the delivery platform for content creation, distribution, viewing and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. Nevertheless, Australian telecommunications service availability in remote Indigenous communities remains significantly lower than in the broader population (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2008). As Brady and Dyson concluded in their study on mobile technology for the Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Council, “mobile phones should not be considered a luxury in remote areas ... this technology does indeed have the potential to enhance people’s lives socially, culturally and economically” (2009, p. 41). The mobile/smart phone has become a popular choice in remote Indigenous

communities. As Laurel Dyson notes “Indigenous communities need mobile applications and content designed specifically for them and by them, in order to continue to practice their own culture and language on their own land” (Dyson 2013, p. 24).

Inge Kral had observed, “Young people want to author a new narrative, one that differs from that of the older generation, and thus have their worldview validated in the public space” (Kral 2013, p. 62). The narrative is not always benign. Nicolas Rothwell recently wrote about the unintended consequences of the rise of mobile phone usage amongst young people in Aboriginal communities. Rothwell (2013) contends it has led to “the recent abrupt decline” of graffiti. Text messaging has supplanted graffiti as the preferred mode of instant expression and venting of frustrations, opinions, passions and jealousies particularly for young girls:

Again the tale is one of remote Aboriginal community youth absorbing new influences and making them their own. As soon as pre-paid and mobile networks became available in the main bush communities of the Top End, Cape York and the Western Desert teenager began texting and the practice is universal now. Girls message each other from room to room from house to house, photo images flash here and there, videos animations, songs ... a constant stream of SMS signals... When you can signal your loves and hates and anxieties in the click of a keystroke, why move outdoors to paint them up with a spray can? (Rothwell 2013).

The distribution on local content in the Yirrkala community often happens via mobile phone technologies. Yolngu people have a low computer ownership, but have a high mobile phones ownership per household. The digital age and information technology is being used in Aboriginal communities to “keep culture strong” and to engage children and young people in knowledge about their culture and histories (Lane 2010).

Driving around Darwin in 2009 with Wukun Wanambi after his exhibition of bark paintings, he received a call on his mobile phone telling him of a death in the community, and immediately began chanting a Yolngu mourning song and tapping out the clap stick rhythms with his fingernails on the face of his mobile phone.

## The (remote) Phone Booth

Curtis Taylor is a young Martu filmmaker and artist from the remote community of Parnngurr (Cotton Creek) in the Pilbara region of far Western Australia born in 1990. Thirty years before Curtis was born, at the time of his grandparents in the 1960s, the Martu, one of the last group of Aboriginal people to come to into white settlement, were still living a fully traditional life in the desert and had barely encountered modernity, much less technology, as Langton says they, “switched from sand signs to digital data only two generations ago” (Langton 2013, p. xx) At that time in 1963 in a galaxy far away, *Dr Who* made his first appearance on British television and memorably stepped inside the blue London police box /phone booth subsequently known as the Tardis, to travel via time and relative dimension in space, everywhere in any epoch. Meanwhile closer to home, in Australia, renowned Aboriginal country and gospel singer Jimmy Little recorded his hit song, *Royal Telephone* (1964). “I can feel the current moving down the line ... There will be no charges, telephone is free. It is built for service, just for you and me” (Lyrics: *Royal Telephone*).

Before they had a community telephone booth the Martu relied on the VHF radio frequency network, as the old man says: “It wasn’t a phone, it wasn’t a phone. We all had two ways (radios) ... we had our radio base here, if we wanted to talk to Well 33” (voice in *Telephone Booth*, 2012).

In 1975, Rover Thomas a stockman who was born near Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, not far in desert distances from where Curtis Taylor grew up, had a series of dreams. By then Rover Thomas was living far away in the East Kimberley at the tiny community of Warmun with the Gija people. Rover Thomas’s dreams propelled his making a new corroboree called the Gurirr Gurirr. It was an innovative creation because as the dancers enacted the travels of the spirit of a local woman who had died in a car accident caused by the torrential monsoonal rain whipped up by the Rainbow Serpent, they carried painted boards on their shoulders. Rover Thomas came to be regarded as the founder of the East Kimberley painting movement (Spinner 2012).

Penny Tweedie’s classic 1980 photograph, *Tom Noytuna using the new telephone at Korlobidahdah to invite clan members to a ceremony* stands as the nodal image of the central place of the telephone booth in a remote community. “This one new telephone, this one good story for us. When Kids get sick, we telephone clinic, they send truck with medicine. And good for ceremony business. Every outstation has telephone now so

easy to talk to everyone, make sure everyone turns up for ceremony” said Tom Noytuna (Tweedie 1998, p. 90). In 2013 emerging Aboriginal artist, Matthew Edwards responded to what he saw as this startling depiction of the Aboriginal grapevine and painted a homage to Penny Tweedie.



Figure 4. Matthew Edwards, *Blackfella grapevine* 2013

In 1990, around the time Curtis was born, Rover Thomas and South Australian artist, Trevor Nickolls, were the first Indigenous artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale. Nickolls frequently referenced technology in his work under the rubric *Dreamtime/Machinetime* and he made a number of paintings about his art adventures with Rover Thomas in what he called, Gondolaland. (n1) In *Dreamtime calling from Gondolaland*, (1990) a Kimberley owl roosts on the window shutter, outside Van Gogh’s starry night twinkles and an enormous lime green, square faced touch-tone push button dial telephone occupies centre stage. Stage left, an Aboriginal woman holds a stockman’s hat of the sort worn by Rover Thomas and passes on a phone message - “Vincent rang/ Art rang/ Rover rang/ Boomerang”- to the cool dude hipster snake, who could be the Rainbow Serpent himself is smoking and wearing a jaunty artist’s beret (Spinner 2010, 2013).



Figure 5. Trevor Nickolls, Painting, *Dreamtime Calling from Gondolaland 1990*  
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

In 1995 Rover Thomas travelled back to his Country, Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route, where he was amazed to see a telephone booth in the middle of the desert which made such an impression on him, he made a painting of it, *Telephone Box -Gunowaggi*. (Well 33). The story notes:

The artist recently passed this phone box when travelling to his birthplace at Yalda Soak on the Canning Stock Route. When he had passed through this area as a young man there was nothing but the crossroads (of the Kidson track and the Canning Stock Route) ... Now people come from all the surrounding country to use the phone box, which provides free calls to anywhere, in the district (Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Certificate No. APO672).



Figure 6. Rover Thomas, Painting, *Telephone box Gunowaggi*, 1995

In 1997, the Gija from Warmun performed the Rover Thomas Gurirr Gurirr in Paris at La Grande Halle de la Villette for the exhibition, *Peintres Aborigenes d’Australie*. A betacam video recording was made, and in 2007 Arnaud Morvan had the tape transferred to DVD and circulated copies to the surviving dancers, singers and painters who had gone to Paris and interviewed them in Warmun (Morvan 2012).



Figure 7. *The most remote phone box in the world*, 1995. Photograph Leon Stainer

In 2009-2010 Curtis Taylor worked for Martumedia as an intern on the film documentation project running in tandem with the Canning Stock Route project, a collaboration between artists and communities and the National Museum of Australia, to create an exhibition of paintings and an array of multimedia installations, *Yiwarra*

*Kuju, The Canning Stock Route* which toured Australia in 2010/2011 (National Museum of Australia 2010). Monique La Fontaine refers to Curtis Taylor as a “digital native”, having “grown up with computers, video games, the internet and mobile technologies” (La Fontaine 2011, p. 196). Under the mentorship of media professionals, Curtis Taylor made a number of short two to three minute documentaries about life around his community, Parnngurr (Cotton Creek). *Punmu Life-Everything we need is here*, is about the community store; *Kuul* (2010) is about the community school; *Puntukurnu Parna* (2010) is about the Martu land rights story and *Nyiru* (2010) is an episode from the Seven Sisters Story (the Pleiades). In July 2010 he was invited to speak about his experiences at the Information Technology and Indigenous Communities, (ITIC) Symposium at AIATSIS in Canberra.

I wrote this story when I was on a plane coming back from Canberra ... This film *Mamu* is about right and wrong, the past, the future, and the new and the old, it’s about the internet and Martu and this thing in our culture, how can we use this thing, how we going to use this technology to work for us and for us, to use it the way we want to use it- not technology using us- you know. That’s the message *Mamu* is sending out. This story, I think reflects us today ... us aboriginal people, the younger generation using the Internet, using these new kinds of technologies that we don’t really fully understand. It will make a lot of people think... how we should go into this brave new world, the future (Taylor 2011)

The story Curtis Taylor wrote on the plane on the way back from that ITIC Symposium was his first narrative film, *Mamu*. *Mamu* was filmed on location in Newman and Lake Dora, Punmu Community. A young man from the community take photographs with an mobile phone of sacred cave paintings and puts them up his Facebook page. He is warned and told to take them down by an Elder but he retorts all that traditional stuff is rubbish. He’s not worried about the Mumu spirits, but he ought to be. The Mamu wreak their vengeance in the style of the best schlock horror movie tropes and he is eventually killed. Strong message, strong law and a pointed, clever, thoughtful take on the some of the strengths and weaknesses of new technology. Telling a clear message that technology is all about how you use it, not good or bad in itself, but always requires, like all forms of knowledge transmission that a protocol be followed;

the secret sacred no more than the personal or the private, should not be put up on your Facebook page, everyone will see it and trouble will follow.

TBC Figure 8. Curtis Taylor, still from film, *Mamu* showing Bobby Jay photographing rock art with his mobile phone.

Taylor's strength is a great clarity of purpose; he interrogates technology while gleefully using all its resources and capacities and dramatizes the generational divide while simultaneously showing that understanding the implications of technology crosses the generations. In the mid 1980s in, another desert community, Yuendumu, Eric Michaels wished he could have assisted the Warlpiri to make a Kung Fu movie or a Warlpiri Ninja show (Michaels 1994). He would have been proud of the seamless ease of Curtis Taylor's appropriation of the Slasher film trope to reinforce a point of traditional law.

In 2012 Curtis Taylor collaborated with Melbourne based multimedia artist, Lilly Hibberd to create the multi-lingual video installation, *Telephone Booth*. It is a celebration of the telephone booth in remote communities. In many places, booths are being decommissioned, and replaced by mobile phone technology, however the mobile phone network has not yet extended to the Western Desert so the phone booth is still critically important technology. Mobile phones are still ubiquitous amongst young people because of all their other functions, texting, photography, exchanging music and photographs via Bluetooth.

Curtis Taylor refers to: "culture start to talk back to the people through these archives of knowledge" (Taylor & Hibberd 2013) and references it in both *Mamu* and *Telephone Booth*:

Traditional singing in the front, at the start of the movie didn't hear those songs when I was a kid. Those songs were recorded twenty years ago on the river ... I been put that in the movie so when Martu watch it ... people from that area ... they hear that singing and say oh yeah that's my grandfather, he's singing and that's my song, that's my tjurrkpa [dreaming] ... Martu tailored Western tools and ideas to their needs ... started listening to records and cassettes of recordings

that researchers and anthropologists had made with Martu doing corroborees (Taylor & Hibberd, 2013)

Just as Clark Kent becomes Superman in the phone booth and the doctor consults the Tardis, Curtis recalls being a young boy and hanging out at the community telephone booth and reveling in the magic of technology, “You ring someone up and you cant’ see them but they can tell you what they are wearing” (WHICH FILM????) Curtis said. As Curtis and Lilly comment the Telephone booth is the site of technological transformation of the human form, as they say, “we all change with technology” (Taylor & Hibberd 2013).

### **Overseas Museums and the need to return and engage**

Australian museums and art gallery have actively engaged their collections of the *objects* of material culture and made these available to communities who have been the *subject* of their collections. The digital repository must be activated, opened up, and opened out, so that material does not merely lie there, in repose, and remain asleep in the museum but is awake, woken up and finds a new life out in the communities from which it came.

Australian Indigenous cultural material was collected and sent overseas to feed the European public’s thirst for the unusual and exotic and continued, well after the establishment of museums in Australia. Now is the time for museums and galleries around the world, in Europe to take up the challenge of technologies to find innovative ways to engage with the communities and to share via technology their culturally rich collections with the communities who created the objects. This can now be done easily with the digitisation of collections.

The museum’s role of show and tell is changing to one that is critically re-imagined and as the *Phone Booth* shows, Indigenous youth are taking up the challenge by engaging fully with a multitude of technologies to tell their stories. The advent of information technology, high speed broadband and the use of technology on regional and remote communities offers new ways and interesting ways for museums and art galleries to engage their collections.

Information technologies have an ideal potential to create global democracies based on an increase understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. The potential social benefits are extensive. One

of the most important is that it allows Indigenous peoples to position themselves outside colonial nation-states, in the new cyberspace (Langton 2001).

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