

Coming Together Through Knowing: an app to challenge Indigenous representation in the media

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As digital technology continues to effect journalism and its relation to civic engagement and participation, First Nations news industry professionals and new media users are utilising these innovative technologies to not only contest mainstream media representations of Indigenous people, but hold Australia's other dominant institutions to account.

In mid-2015, I entered the Indigenous cadetship program offered by the Faculty of Arts to assist with a research project being developed within the Centre for Advancing Journalism (CAJ) called the Civic Impact of Journalism. One of the first tasks assigned to me by the project's lead chief investigator, Associate-Professor Margaret Simons, was to conduct an audit of existing news outlets of most relevance to Indigenous Australia. Her suspicion was that Blackfellas were engaging with new media news outlets in new ways.

A rough audit very quickly yielded around 150 active outlets that were being regularly accessed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for their news fare. However, what was also immediately apparent was how fragmented and geographically disparate these news sources were. It became clear that simply aggregating these numerous channels could provide both a public service and a deeper insight into the activity within Australia's Indigenous public sphere.

What emerged from that line of thinking was a project that CAJ and the current project's partners have come to refer to as the Wakul App. The project title in full – developed in consultation with the Muurrbay Aboriginal Language and Culture cooperative in Nambucca Heads – is Wakul gagil ngarraldiyn, which in my traditional Gathang language means “coming together through knowing”.

We applied for seed funding from within the University and were allocated \$40,000 from the Indigenous Research Initiative to develop our rough-hewn audit into an interactive research and analytics tool that would assist the public, universities, businesses, and potentially improve government policy on Indigenous affairs.

The project involved internal interdisciplinary research and engagement with Professor Helen Sullivan from the Melbourne School of Government, Dr Lyndon Ormond-Parker from the School of Population and Global Health, and Professor Richard Sinnott from Applied Computing Systems in Computing and Information Systems Department, Melbourne School of Engineering joining the research team within CAJ. The project also fostered external collaboration with recognised and respected Indigenous-owned and operated organisations in the National Indigenous Radio Service and IndigenousX.

Within CAJ, research assistant Elyas Khan implemented the primary software engineering for the project and around mid-2016 a prototype app began to take shape. As the project developed, CAJ fellow Dr David Nolan and myself gave a presentation on it at the 2016 Australian New Zealand Communication Association conference in Newcastle and afterwards were invited to submit an article to a special section of the Australasian Journal of Information Systems.

As the prototype continued to be developed we invited collaboration and direction from our Indigenous partner organisations, and prominent First Nations new media participant-users, as well as news industry professionals and organisations. In October 2016, Leading academics and media industry practitioners from around Australia joined members of the project's research team for a roundtable conference held in partnership with Oxfam Australia at the Wheeler Centre to discuss strategies for improving the representation of Indigenous people within various facets of the dominant news industry.

A new research team that includes members from University of Canberra and Deakin University, as well as University of Melbourne emerged from this exchange, and the Wakul app project transitioned into an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage proposal in partnership with Guardian Australia and IndigenousX.

My belief is that First Nations journalists, whether they be industry professionals or citizen journalists, are the best placed sources to report and advise on Indigenous Australia. In the heavily mediated social and political environment of today, genuine self-determined changes in our circumstances can be effected, and representations of us corrected. It's my hope that the next phase of development and implementation of the Wakul App contributes to this push.