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In Conversation

◆ Weaving Networks for the International Year of Indigenous communication

An interview with David Hernández Palmar and Jason De Santolo

Interview conducted by Tamaki Tokita and Emily Starrett Wright

Introduction and Context

Media created by indigenous peoples and informed by their worldviews show that indigenous use of new media is creative, powerful and growing, and is altering terminology used to describe media. David Hernández Palmar (Wayuu people – Venezuela, Abya Yala¹) and Jason De Santolo (Garrwa and Barunggam people – Australia) met in Auckland recently and exchanged ideas.²

This followed the 2010 Continental Summit of Indigenous Communication (Cauca, Colombia), whose declaration announced 2012 as the “International Year of Indigenous Communication”. This supports the emergence of international networks and the growth and maintenance of relationships between indigenous communicators, practitioners and researchers.

Indigenous media are tools for networking, language promotion, awareness-raising and the sharing of information. They can support indigenous aims of self-determination. The interview with Hernández Palmar and De Santolo was held in this context and with these aims in mind. Non-indigenous academics and media practitioners may facilitate these aims, for example, by arranging networking opportunities, providing translation, or through collaboration.³



David Hernández Palmar (Iipuana clan, Wayuu nation, Maracaibo, Venezuela) is a social communicator,⁴ activist and audio-visual producer. He has produced documentaries for broadcast in Europe for Deutsche Welle and Canal Arte and has worked collaboratively on documentaries of the Wayuu such as *Dalia se va de Jepira* (2006) and co-directed *Owners of the Water* (2009) with Caimi Waiassé, Xavante of Brazil. He runs community workshops and curates film festivals throughout Colombia and Venezuela, and is a journalist for *Wayuunaiki*. He has been a guest researcher at the Anthropology Department of the University of Iowa, and is a member of the advisory boards of PeruVine/PeruDigital, the Ethnographic Digital Laboratory of the University of Central Florida and the International Ethnobotanical Association.



Jason De Santolo (Garrwa and Barunggam people), works at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning (UTS Sydney, Australia) De Santolo has a background in Law and a Research Masters in Social Science. He actively collaborates with artists, musicians and filmmakers through creative practice and has coordinated international Indigenous delegations to Aotearoa New Zealand and the U.S. He continues to pursue documentary and new media potential for enhancement of research and project outcomes in communities. His work at Jumbunna focuses on developing creative self-determination strategies, the sharing of knowledge for the earth’s sustainability and the enhancement of indigenous wellbeing.

New media networking

New media contribute to the creation and distribution of media by indigenous communities, a movement that transcends national borders. They bypass hegemonic media and provide alternative representations, promote engagement and education,

share information and raise awareness, creating the ability, as De Santolo says, to tell indigenous stories "across media landscapes".

Technological advances that give relatively cheap access to recording equipment and distribution, social networking such as Facebook and Twitter, and blended new and old media, make modern communications technology "accessible to all, not merely as consumers but as participants and creators" (Raby, 2006). This helps achieve indigenous goals such as networking, language promotion and self-determination.

Networking is especially important because indigenous peoples are often marginalised by the state, and research indicates they are misrepresented by commercial media.⁵ Furthermore, for many indigenous peoples, isolation is a risk if disparate groups cannot communicate, and the state and media often ignore geographically dispersed voices when they do not speak together. This is particularly serious in situations where conflict often arises, as when commercial ventures exploit resources in indigenous territory. Some of these difficulties can be ameliorated through the use of new media to facilitate networking that is accessible and can reach broad areas, as demonstrated by Hernández Palmar's experience. ⁶

Use of media also enables indigenous communities to broaden the arena in which indigenous struggles occur and 'reframe' issues by connecting them to global or regional contexts, and to pressure nation-states to conform to international conventions and agreements on indigenous peoples' rights, for example. A group protesting the building of a hydroelectric dam on their lands can thus reframe their protest as part of wider, transnational movements.⁷ They can expose patterns of discrimination, learn from others' successful strategies, reach pre-existing support bases and new audiences, and use or change established terminology. Indigenous communication is at once globalised and local, and new media are making state borders less relevant.

Tokita: How did this visit allow you to network with other indigenous communities?

Hernández Palmar: For me, coming to Aotearoa [New Zealand] has given me the opportunity to gather with other brothers and sisters, and share their work in what I call the emancipatory movement of our peoples through media. That's really important because we can articulate future collaborations that we are already talking about. We've talked about dates for them to go out there. I had the opportunity to see what was going on in Australia, and for example, here in Aotearoa. We're talking about things that won't be just words, but actions and work. I've talked about eight film screen series, writing scripts, two co-productions And that's something that's really valuable to us, because in other spaces you don't get to meet people like that, and also to be as serious and as responsible to make a commitment. We've already been through our own process. So the only thing we did was just to connect the dots. And that's really a big deal. It's meaningful. It was great that we talked about future collaborations, and how we're taking advantage of the fact that we have a lot of things in common.

De Santolo: Coming together in these new places would only have happened with our elders, in the times gone. But now we're meeting as younger people. It's very exciting for our movement.

Tokita: Could you tell us about the usefulness of new social networking tools like Twitter?

De Santolo: Yes, we're trying to shift into more of a transmedia approach. We've developed a pilot portal, where we can share our academic work. We've been doing video, and we have an online radio, and a little Twitter account. We have our network of activists through Twitter as well, that shares our work, and research insights. And it's been really effective. We've only been doing that for about six months, and more people are coming to our website. I mean, the whole idea of 'build a website and people will come' is so old school. So we have to tell our story across media landscapes. It's also been really cool because we've started to hook up with international networks as well.

Tokita: Has it been useful in getting more young people to participate as well?

De Santolo: I think so. It's a little hard to tell now, but I hope so. We haven't gone to Facebook and things yet. We've seen some horrible examples of how Facebook has been used. For example, we have a new national congress. It's meant to be a national representative body and they set up a Facebook page, and I went to it, and there were about 30 'likes' on it. That's just not a good communication strategy. It means that if you present yourself, you can present yourself as quite weak, through social media, so it has to be very carefully done. So we're going very slowly.

Tokita: What about you, David? What do you think about these new tools, and do you use them, personally?

Hernández Palmar: Yes, I use them a lot. Personally, I use Twitter and Facebook. They've been effective in terms of finding people you know in other spaces. For example, Phoebe Fletcher and I met each other on Twitter, and added each other on Facebook. And we didn't know we were going to be on the same panel here at the University of Auckland, for example.

Starrett Wright: Can you tell us how that happened? How did you meet each other on Twitter?

Hernández Palmar: I was there to tweet one of the pieces of information that I was sharing with the media, because tweeting is more effective than sending it to a journal. Journals look for certain topics, but on Twitter you find the source, and then you follow the person who is a source as well, so that you get the information directly. You're working with that person directly. And we started to stay in touch.

Starrett Wright: And at that point, did you say you didn't know she was from Aotearoa New Zealand?

Hernández Palmar: No, I didn't.

Starrett Wright: And she didn't know you were from Venezuela?

Hernández Palmar: No. And we have a lot of friends in common that we already knew. It's big, but also small. You trust a person just because of the friends you have in common. That's sort of the Facebook way. When I see information that someone else is publishing, I read it and say "this is a good thing for me to disseminate." As for the way of participating in the new media, I think people need to be clear about the logic and structure of social networking. For example, Facebook has a different logic to Twitter, and a blog is different to a website. If people aren't aware of this, they can lose the effectiveness of the work that they're doing. People have to be really clear about the logic and the architecture of the new media, especially on the Internet. When you're on Facebook, you really have to know what the use of Facebook is. The same goes with Twitter, or your blog, or a platform for streaming your documentaries, and so on. I think the whole discussion happens when you're not sure what you want to do with the work that you're doing. I think it's about defining well what you're going to do.

Tokita: According to Alia (2010:72), "even in relatively wealthy 'first world' countries such as the United States, it is a mistake to assume universality of access" to new media. Although media distribution remains a problem for many communities, in today's media landscape, new media are becoming more and more important as a tool for the distribution of indigenous materials. Could you give us some examples of how you have taken advantage of new media in order to distribute your material?

Hernández Palmar: There's a lot of discussion in the ENDOC (Encuentro de Documentalistas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe)⁸ meetings about having a platform to stream all the Latin American and Caribbean documentaries. And then we realised that it was really expensive to make a platform. So I said "why don't we use Isuma TV?" And they said "yeah, we'll look into it", because they were looking for other websites that were already set up. But they also said "what we want to do is to have our own space to stream our documentaries. So would that really be an effective way of showing people what we're doing?" They are considering having their own channel through Isuma TV, because they know that Isuma TV has a really effective platform, and they can take advantage of something that is already set up. ⁹

Sometimes we don't have to waste time by creating our own space, if another space has already been created. You just have to fortify it, make contributions, and make it better. We're tired of creating new networks. In Spanish we say "el espacio no se crea, se construye [space is not created, but built]." And building is a process. It's not about creating a new network. Networking has been around forever, in different ways. So I think that we just need to take advantage of the spaces that we've already been working with. Like for example, I'm going to take the samples of contributions that they're making in my sister country, Australia, and the Māori [in Aotearoa New Zealand] here. There are spaces that have already been set up, but we need to make them better with our contributions. And I think there is a time when people need to listen to their critics, because those critics always have a contribution to make. Having critics is a good thing.

Starrett Wright: Some indigenous media practitioners find academia's approach to knowledge and distribution difficult to reconcile with indigenous practices. For example, there is a huge focus in academia on 'outputs' and a failure to recognise, for example, networking and non-broadcast documentaries as valid research. Have you ever found academic institutions' approaches problematic?

De Santolo: With the documentary making, I'm just guerrilla, really. But we're being forced to move into different places, and institutions are becoming more and more problematic for us in Australia. Things are becoming more conservative in Australia, in terms of academia and things. And it's becoming important to realise that universities and academic frameworks can become really problematic in terms of the way they treat our media. We're looking at trying to move into living stories, or living archive principles, which ensure that the community knowledge that is shared through the documentary processes stay with the community. And also, it's really important to keep that vibrancy and to keep the stories alive, so that they don't get locked off. So we're not placing our people and our culture in a timeline, we're just leaving it in there. And there's some really great work being done back home, by people like Dr. Romaine Moreton¹⁰. With protocols, Terri Janke¹¹... So we have some really strong people doing really great work.

Hernández Palmar: In terms of the academy, it is all about publishing, writing books. For those people in the academy, they don't just want to work with us. Sometimes they just get underestimated because they're not writing books while they're spending time creating films with us. I think there is this part of the academy that they don't understand. They don't understand why the academy is doing this. But you have to write a book. Otherwise, all the work that you've been doing isn't worth anything. So I think in terms of documentary making, in terms of solidarity, in terms of the value of the human, organic process, the academy still doesn't get it. It's about the performance, the outputs. I think that was valid, with reference to Tuhiwai-Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*. The academy must now face reality, and get back to the place where it belongs. They have to reconfigure the whole notion of 'outputs', but also getting the valuable people to write something.

De Santolo: I do academic work, I do intelligent work, but it's not necessarily in books.

Electronic indigenous media often play a part in the language education of their communities. The need for revitalisation and strengthening of indigenous languages is paramount as "each particular language holds a unique perspective on the world, and in the case of minority cultures, is often the last bulwark against assimilation into a globalised multiculturalism" (Lysaght, 2010).

Starrett Wright: The Waitangi Tribunal said of te reo Māori [the Māori language] that "the place of the language in the life of the nation is indicative of the place of the people" (Waitangi Tribunal, 1986). Media and indigenous languages are both essential aspects of indigenous self-determination. With this in mind, what are some methods that the Wayuu community has employed for the revival of Wayuunaiki [the Wayuu language]?

Hernández Palmar: I think that there are two distinct processes for language revival: revitalisation and strengthening. Revitalisation is when the language is already about to die. Strengthening is where there are many speakers but not many of them transmit the language. For example there are people that say "the Wayuu language is in danger of extinction" and others say "that's a lie. Just think about it, how many Wayuu people don't speak Wayuunaiki?" But the issue isn't "how many speakers are there?" rather, it's "how much language transmission is happening?"

The strategy is to do the best we can to make it possible for children to learn from their grandparents. To have the best quantity of vocabulary and the fluency of speech, first hand. The language is also part of the generation gaps we have. For example, I think that my generation and the generation after mine were the most affected by ethnic shame and the indigenous language not being present. In spite of the fact that there were speakers, there are many people in my generation that did not speak it. But now, children are receiving this privilege of the strengthening and revitalisation of the language. It's necessary to recognise this generational gap. Then the strategy is, first, to be aware of history and the importance of being able to maintain the language, and most importantly, to respect the times of transmission that there are between grandparents and children.

However, direct intergeneration language transmission is often difficult in urbanised indigenous populations like the Wayuu and the Māori populations, as many young people from these indigenous groups live in cities, "removed from their cultural base and language" (Pouwhare, 2011). For this reason, the younger generations are also "sorely lacking in indigenous language skills", and are "likely to be less respectful of its purity" (Browne, 1996). Indigenous media programs, particularly radio, are very helpful for ensuring language transmission to younger generations in the cities.¹² Dr Joe Te Rito has plans under way to offer a similar course by internet but using real-life conversations between indigenous elders. Media's use or failure to use indigenous languages is thus very powerful. However, producing media in indigenous languages is not a simple decision.

Tokita: Do you have difficulties in deciding the language of your works (in Wayuunaiki [the language of the Wayuu people] or Spanish?)

Hernández Palmar: For *Owners of the Water*, it was difficult to choose the language that was happening at the time. Most of it was made in Brazil, and, of course, they spoke Portuguese. When we were trying to decide which people to interview, there were people who stood out. For example, this character Eboni – we decided to film her because she is very Xavante and she shouted, "I am of the lineage of the owners of the water". I think that at the time when one films, one doesn't decide exactly what language is going to be filmed. I think that you film people that should be included for the impact, the force of what they are going to say.

Tokita: Were there any difficulties with respect to the different indigenous languages being used in "Owners of the Water"?

Hernández Palmar: I think that, in the end, the issue is really about understanding the material because, for example, I can speak Portuguese but I don't understand Ge, the Xavante language. I was imagining that we would make a super documentary, because there were good photos, good material ... But then when Caimi came to interpret all the dialogues and when we understood the material, we said "Okay, we still need some images, we haven't recorded this ... " So yes, evidently language is very important and also there are some difficulties with respect to understanding. When you are recording a person talking in a language you don't speak, you often don't know when to cut. But you know about the context, so you say to yourself: "Okay, the context is like this, and I think the person is saying this." And that's how it goes.

Tokita: In your other works, do you sometimes choose the Spanish language to reach a bigger audience?

Hernández Palmar: There is one documentary that we've made where there's as much Spanish as Wayuunaiki. But no, I don't think I consider that, like "What do I have to do so that more or less people see it?" I do want to make more material in Wayuunaiki, because I really like the reaction of people when they say "ah, they are talking in Wayuunaiki". They like it, and it helps them to remain familiarised with the language.¹³

Tokita: Is 'indigenous' media an appropriate umbrella term for media from all indigenous communities?

Hernández Palmar: In the end, 'indigenous' is a political term that has to do with language and territory. And in this sense it's necessary to keep using it. I hope that someday there is justice and we won't need to use the word 'indigenous': we can simply say, 'Wayuu' or 'mestizo'... I think that before being 'indigenous', I am Wayuu. It is also like the process in Abya Yala, in Latin America or in the Americas, of the subject of being 'Indian'... Here, indigenous peoples, of this side of the Pacific or in Europe, do not accept this word. They don't identify with the word because of historical matters. And they would say, "no, I'm Sami," "No, I'm Aymara". I wish that the term didn't exist, but there are realities and I reclaim the word 'indigenous' wherever I can. The reality is that there still isn't full justice in some cases, so we have to keep struggling, accompanied by the word 'indigenous'.

Footnotes

1 "Abya Yala" is the American continent (both North and South Americas). It is a word in the language of the Kuna peoples of Panama and Colombia) that means "land in its full maturity", or "Continent of Life" (Becker, 2002), and it has been gaining currency among Latin American indigenous groups. Takir Mamani, the Aymara leader, proposed using the term as a way of countering the use of coloniser-language place names and reclaiming indigenous identity (Abya-Yala Publicaciones). It is a way of thinking that decolonises the notion of the two "Americas" as separate from each other, and conceives the land as a unit undivided by nation-states.

2 Hernández Palmar and De Santolo were keynote speakers at the "Expanding Documentary" Conference at the Auckland

University of Technology. Hernández Palmar also headed the "Indigenous Media, Participatory Democracy and Language Revitalisation in Abya Yala and Aotearoa: The centrality of language in indigenous transformation" seminar at the University of Auckland. Hernández Palmar also used his visit to Aotearoa New Zealand to communicate and exchange ideas with Te Whare Kura, a Māori research group, and to visit Māori communities.

3 For example, Hernández Palmar and De Santolo had effective collaborations with Laura Graham (USA) and Fabio Cavadini (Australia), respectively.

4 A social communicator [comunicador social] is different to a journalist or a filmmaker in that his/her goal is to benefit a group of people. Unlike journalists or filmmakers, social communicators do not necessarily strive for neutrality or objectivity in reporting. A social communicator uses media to bring peoples together for an emancipatory project.

5 Sue Abel and others have found systemic negative representations of Māori people in news media in Aotearoa New Zealand: there are few stories about Māori people in 'mainstream' media, and they are less frequently cited as sources on topics affecting them. When their words are reported, they do not "necessarily get the chance to articulate a distinctively indigenous worldview" (Abel, 2010).

6 A good example of media that achieves this is Venezuela's "Red de Infocentros" or Info-centre Network, 700 centres which offer training and equipment for community, alternative and citizens' media, to benefit communities through awareness raising and collectively solving problems. The "Info-centre Foundation" was recognised for its work improving adult technological literacy by UNESCO in 2010. The Info-centres were one of the results of Venezuela's Organic [Constitutional] Law on Telecommunications 2000 which gives legal recognition to community media. This provides a media space through which indigenous and other groups can network and share information.

7 For example, the human rights, indigenous rights and environmental movements.

8 Meeting of Latin American and Caribbean Documentary Makers

9 You can find Palmar's own channel for the Wayuu community by following this link: <http://www.isuma.tv/hi/en/members/wayuu>

10 Dr. Moreton's profile: <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/journal/kulumun/editorial-board.html>

11 Terri Janke's profile: <http://www.terrijanke.com.au/about-terri.html>

12 Dr. Joe Te Rito has used taped radio conversation in his Māori language acquisition course by radio that reached over 7000 learners through the national network of Māori radio stations. Te Rito, J.S. (2005). *He Korokoro Kīwaha: An intermediate-level Māori language conversational course on euphemisms, idioms, slang and other Māori sayings*, 3rd Edition, Napier, New Zealand: Brebner Print. Radio has traditionally been a medium that indigenous peoples have found very useful, especially for language revitalisation, because of its relatively low setup costs and local flavour.

13 There is a new feature film in the Wayuu language, *Shawantama'ana*, which will be screened in Venezuela in January 2012. For the trailer, see <http://vimeo.com/34708698>.

Links

ENDOC (Encuentro de Documentalistas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe) (Spanish): <http://www.documentalsxxi.org/index.php>

Frontyard Films (Amanda King & Fabio Cavadini): <http://www.frontyardfilms.com.au/> (also on Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/user5424940>)

Hernández Palmar's photos of Wayuu life (Spanish): <http://www.fotografosd76.com/sitio/548/david-hernandez-palmar-wayuu-clan-iipuana-colectivo-fotografos-d76/>

Indigenous Tweets (a list of people who tweet in indigenous languages): <http://indigenoustweets.com/>

Isuma TV: <http://www.isuma.tv/>

Owners of the Water information, preview and sales <http://www.der.org/films/owners-of-the-water.html>

Periódico Wayuunaiki (Spanish): <http://www.wayuunaiki.org.ve/>

Red de Infocentros: <http://www.infocentro.gob.ve/>

Trailer for *Shawantama'ana*, a new feature film in the Wayuunaiki language: <http://vimeo.com/34708698>.

Venezuela's Organic Law on Telecommunications (Spanish): http://www.tsj.gov.ve/legislacion/lt_ley.htm

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Waitangi Tribunal. (1986). Wai 11 Te Reo Māori Claim.

About the interviewers

Tamaki Tokita and Emily Starrett Wright are research assistants for Dr. Kathryn Lehman as part of the 2011-2012 Summer Scholars programme at the University of Auckland. Tamaki Tokita has a BA in French and Spanish and is about to start an honours dissertation in the field of translation. Emily Starrett Wright is a Law/Spanish student currently completing her honours in Law.

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David Hernández Palmar and Dr Joseph Te Rito (Rongomaiwahine/Ngāti Kahungunu, Senior Research Fellow of Indigenous Development at Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga) outside Waipapa Marae, the University of Auckland. Photo: Tamaki Tokita.

