

A time for empowerment or a new digital divide?

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The past five years, and the next ten, represent the most significant period in the history of media access and message distribution ever faced by minority and disenfranchised communities. The rise and rise of the internet and digital interactivity means that for the first time in the modern era of mass-communication, the self-serving harbingers of minority community dysfunction—the electronic media and their print networks and corporatised political interests—do not have control of the single largest distribution portal in the world—the web. Not yet anyway. So while the last five years have been spent trying to fully grasp the potential of this portal, the response of communities, artists and agencies over the next ten could come to represent either the emergence of perhaps the most significant domain for communication, empowerment and agency amongst minority groups worldwide, or, the formalising of the ever expanding digital-divide between disenfranchised groups and the ‘mainstream’.

What is exhilarating about this period is that we have before us the *means* of getting stories and messages (previously unheard or consigned to the commercial waste-basket of ‘worthiness’) to a global audience that is looking to control its information and entertainment space—an audience that is actively looking elsewhere for stimulation now that the Western mythologies have been exhausted by Hollywood. But how will we use the portal and what will we do with our programs and initiatives to ensure that this is an era of empowerment and not a time of further division?

Paying lip-service to this potential to reshape political, cultural and social landscapes to the benefit of our communities is the greatest threat to this change happening. It will only happen if it is driven by substantive partnerships with the disenfranchised and disempowered groups with whom we work. Countless professionals across the arts, media and community development are as guilty as many employees in NGO’s and government agencies of ‘farming’ the disenfranchised and disempowered communities that they work with or represent. There is a lot of money to be made in keeping disempowered peoples dependent on the expertise and skills of outsiders. How many of you have concrete programs in place that are premised upon your job or the jobs of your colleagues being replaced permanently by members of the community or disenfranchised group that you work with?

The development of media programs in the interactive and digital domain must be premised upon such models. If the communities we work with do not have at least equal control or agency over the process, from its development, through to story, content, production and final product, then talk of empowerment is purely lip-service. When this shift in our working models is achieved, then we can look with anticipation to raising the bar on the quality and marketing of our stories and messages and exploiting this new portal of distribution for the benefit of all peoples.

*David S Vadiveloo is the Director of **Us Mob** (www.usmob.com.au), the world’s first children’s interactive Indigenous content television and web series and Australia’s first Indigenous children’s television series. **Us Mob** was created after David spent seven years in communities in Australia and around the world developing the “Community Prophets” model of community cultural development. **Us Mob** employed over 70 Arrernte Town Camp residents as story contributors, actors, crew and editorial executives. The project was created in partnership with Tangentyere Council and the community retains a profit share in the series. **Us Mob** was funded under an Australian Film Commission/ ABC broadband initiative with support from the Adelaide Film Festival, the South Australian Film Corporation and the Telstra Foundation.*

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