

Natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the crucial role of First Nations media

March 16 2022, by Daniel Featherstone, Archie Thomas & Lyndon Ormond-Parker



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First Nations media outlets provide a critical role in the day-to-day lives

of Indigenous people. In times of crisis, the service they provide is even more important.

Yet they get little recognition or support for the work they do, and do not receive the funding they need.

The flooding in NSW and Queensland has once again shown what these outlets provide. This is why the government and the general public need to do more to support them.

First Nations organizations are vital for communities

There are more than 60 First Nations community-controlled organizations in over 235 towns, cities and remote communities across Australia, providing tailored, local news.

In some of these places, where [internet connection](#) is poor or non-existent, these outlets are the only reliable source of information.

A 2017 [study](#) by First Nations Media found that "Indigenous Broadcasting Services provide much more than radio—they are community assets that contribute to strengthening culture, community development and the local economy."

The Koori Mail's response to the NSW floods

The [Koori Mail](#) is Australia's premier and only First Nations-controlled newspaper, started in 1991 by five Bundjalung groups and 100% self-funded. Issued fortnightly, it shares news and events from across the country told from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

In the wake of the disaster, the newspaper became the central hub for flood relief in Lismore. This is despite the fact the Koori Mail building—located by the Wilson River levee bank—was itself flooded.

Volunteers coordinated activities from the footpath outside their ruined office. They arranged helicopter and boat supply drop-offs, cooked meals, clean-up crews and tradespeople, emergency housing, safety and emergency advice, medical attention, mental health support and more.

The Koori Mail's [GoFundMe campaign](#) has now raised over \$640,000 to fund these efforts. The newspaper has just started fundraising for its own much-needed rebuild.

The Koori Mail's general manager Naomi Moran said, "Even though Koori Mail has suffered a great loss here, our key responsibility is to make sure that our people are OK first, not just our staff, not just our board members, but our community. So we're really trying to take the lead and be a hub of information for our mob, especially online."

The Koori Mail's ability to step into the breach and coordinate this effort highlights the unique and invaluable role played by First Nations [media](#) organizations in times of crisis.

First Nations media leading the way in crisis responses

A [report](#) released in January, co-authored with First Nations Media Australia and the Judith Nielsen Institute, investigated the role of First Nations media outlets throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

It showed First Nations media organizations provide a reliable, trusted source of information, often in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

languages, to combat misinformation and help address mental health and welfare issues, for audiences who often mistrust or feel excluded by mainstream media services.

The report provided case studies of three First Nations media organizations:

[PAW Media](#) in central Australia delivered culturally appropriate and locally relevant health advice to people and addressed misinformation in Warlpiri language

[3KND](#) in Melbourne helped keep the Aboriginal community across Melbourne connected, informed and supported with mental health advice during extended lockdown periods

[Wilcannia River Radio](#) in western NSW [provided support](#) for online learning and updated health messages during the major COVID outbreak in August 2021. In the past, it also [distributed fresh water](#) to households when town water supplies dried up.

The report states how First Nations media organizations have played a critical role in keeping communities strong, resilient and connected. These organizations are often going above and beyond broadcasting and communicating through media channels by being physically on the street or communicating with people over the phone or at community events.

PLEASE remind people in Lismore and surrounding towns that they can come down and take a variety of foods and supplies as they need over the coming days.

We are located in front of the flood pump in the CBD—11 Molesworth Stree, Lismore. <https://t.co/DkPrJZhaal>

— Koori Mail (@koorimailnews) [March 4, 2022](#)

How can First Nations media be better supported and more accessible?

First Nations Media Australia notes that [53%](#) of First Nations people cannot access First Nations radio services, including in Adelaide, Canberra, regional Victoria and Tasmania.

This is a missed opportunity to provide these communities with relevant news and information, cultural and community connections, language revitalisation efforts, and job and skill development in media and journalism.

For the first time in decades, however, there are [signs](#) that governments are recognizing the crucial role of First Nations media. Digital inclusion has been included as a specific target in the [2020 Closing the Gap Agreement](#), with governments committing to work with First Nations media to communicate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences.

However, significantly greater government investment is needed to provide the jobs, skills and technical upgrades needed to build the First Nations media sector's capacity and impact.

First Nations community-controlled media organizations provide much more than information. They provide emergency and community services—and are trusted to do so as place-based, culturally safe services and storytellers.

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