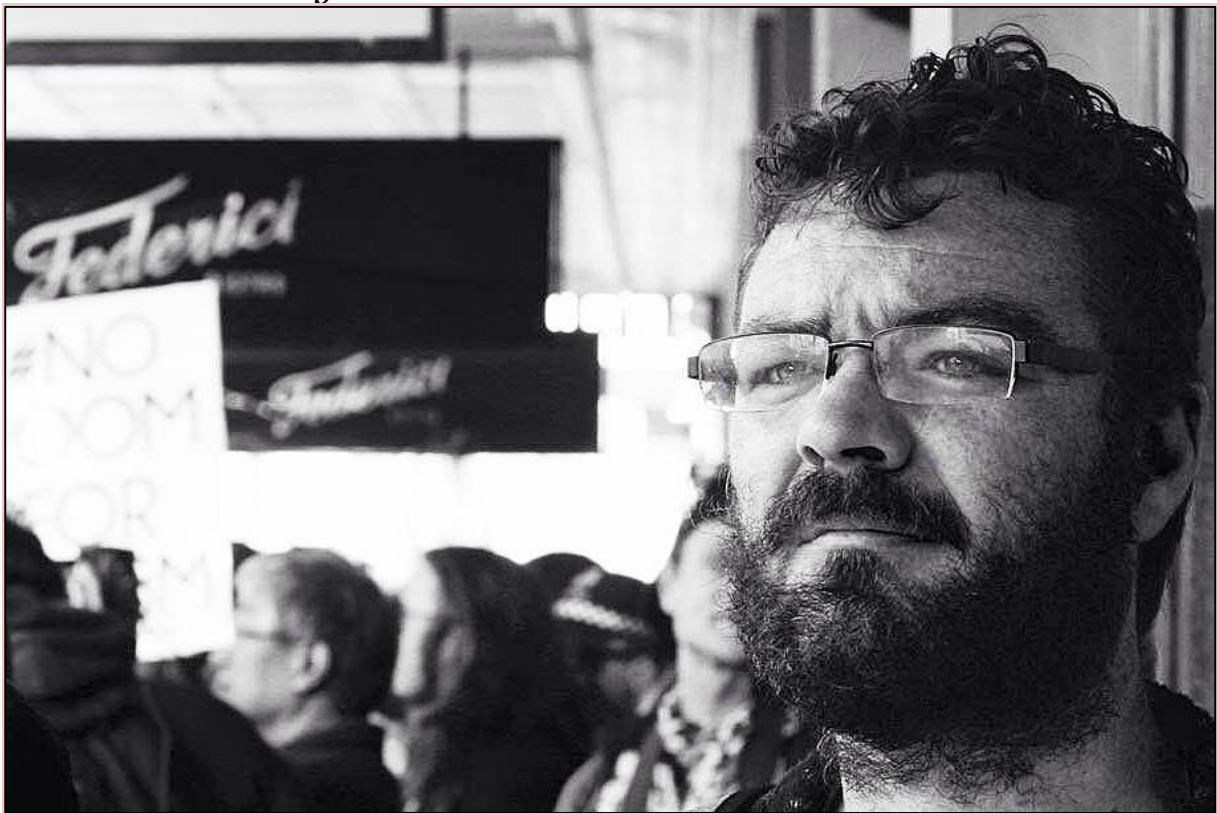


Jumping the gate

Jack Latimore
23 August 2017

A member of the IndigenousX team traces the growing influence of a media project that started life as a tweet and helped reorient the constitutional recognition debate



"I wasn't trying to stack the deck one way or the other," says IndigenousX founder Luke Pearson.

Talk to people in Indigenous new media and you'll probably hear the story of a \$200 online survey that realigned the debate about the constitutional recognition of First Nations people in Australia. At first blush, it's a tale about a niche Indigenous-led media outlet that distinguished itself sharply from a multimillion-dollar, government-sponsored publicity campaign. And it has a happy ending, because the community it represents went on to validate its work. Go deeper, and it's also the story of potentially deeper shifts.

Talk to people involved in new media more generally about how it is influencing news and political communication in Australia, and you might hear about IndigenousX, the group that commissioned that survey. You may hear that the poll was a welcome and long-overdue intervention in the debate about constitutional recognition, particularly in the face of the mainstream media's repeated assurances that Black support for the proposals was a given.

The slow-burn disruption commenced when the mainstream media got around to reporting on the survey data, close to a week after IndigenousX published the findings on 15 June 2015. Independent news site *New Matilda* had covered the story earlier, though, publishing "Online Poll Finds Majority of Black Australia Opposed to Recognise Campaign" on 16 June. The article, by Indigenous journalist Amy McQuire, was distributed widely by Black social media networks, yet was ignored by the same mainstream outlets that had chewed over the results of earlier polls on the topic.

As the recognition process developed, so too did Black dissent begin to emerge, but mainstream news media exhibited next to no interest.

Three days later, a report by Celeste Liddle, another Indigenous writer and that week's @IndigenousX Twitter account host, was published by *Guardian Australia* with the title "87% of Indigenous People Do Not Agree on Recognition: You'd Know if You Listened." The only other mention of the survey during those first five days was a forty-three-second radio interview with IndigenousX founder Luke Pearson, which aired on the National Indigenous Radio Service.

Only on Saturday morning did the results get a nod in News Corp's *Weekend Australian*, where Phillip Hudson, writing an "exclusive" report about a fresh Galaxy/Newspoll on the subject, made a cursory reference to the IndigenousX data at the tail end of his article. Hudson's fleeting mention was enough to stir up minor interest from Australia's other traditionally dominant news organisations.

Since 2012, the agenda-setting mainstream media had largely been interested only in the broader Australian public's generally favourable view of constitutional recognition.

Opposition to the proposal was mentioned occasionally, but assumed to exist only among ultra-conservatives rallied by commentators like News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt, SA senator and Australian Conservatives founder Cory Bernardi, and former Labor minister Gary Johns.

Generally these media outlets uncritically reported the views of Recognise, an organisation formed in 2013 by Reconciliation Australia and seeded with \$10 million from the federal government. Recognise's objective was to promote broad public support for constitutional amendment. Both as an organisation and a public relations campaign, it enjoyed strong bipartisan support from the two major parties, as well as from the Greens. Combined with sizeable corporate support, the almost universal political goodwill gave Recognise preferred status in mainstream coverage and public discussion of constitutional change.

Scepticism about the constitutional recognition proposal had existed among some First Nations people even prior to the appointment of the Gillard government's Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians in 2011. As the recognition process developed, so too did Black dissent begin to emerge, but mainstream news media exhibited next to no interest.

As the increasingly unpopular Tony Abbott-led federal government poured another \$15 million into Recognise while cutting around \$534 million from Aboriginal community services in the 2014 budget, grassroots cynicism spiked. The weight of mistrust and suspicion was almost immediately directed at Recognise. Numerous Indigenous-led opposition pages were launched on Facebook. Long threads of conversation on the topic trailed through the Twittersphere.

Australia's mainstream news media appeared to be oblivious. With their own resources shrinking, these outlets were increasingly reliant on media releases, and most of these were coming from Recognise. They often included details of what appeared to be overwhelming survey support for a constitutional amendment. In May 2015, for instance, Recognise released poll results showing that 87 per cent of Indigenous respondents would vote Yes.

It was less than a month later that IndigenousX's poll yielded a figure of just 32.3 per cent Indigenous support for a Yes vote, and even that level of support was contingent on the amendment's including every one of the 2012 expert panel's recommendations. Less than 13 per cent of Indigenous respondents said they would vote for recognition even if the changes didn't include a clause banning racial discrimination. A very modest 14.7 per cent indicated that they would vote Yes if the final model was symbolic, with no genuine, substantive changes to the Commonwealth's founding document. Arguably, the most damning figure of the IndigenousX survey was the low level of support for Recognise, with only a quarter of Indigenous respondents falling in behind its campaign.

"The level of disparity between the two surveys surprised me," says IndigenousX founder Luke Pearson. "We made a lot of effort to make sure we got it out to as many different people and groups as we could. So I expected that the on-board people would rally their troops and that the anti-Recognise people would rally their troops. I wasn't trying to stack the deck one way or the other." In fact, Pearson says that he expected the results of the two surveys to be closer.

"If the Recognise survey had come out and said 65 per cent of blackfellas supported it, I would have been, like, 'Well that's not my experience, but okay,'" he says. "But they came out with 87 per cent. I was, like, 'That's impossible. It's too high.' If you randomly asked a hundred Aboriginal people, to have eighty-seven of them say yes to it — that just wasn't what I was hearing at the time."

The ABC got around to reporting on the contradiction ten days after IndigenousX released the survey results, when journalist Bill Birtles interviewed Luke Pearson for a story broadcast on ABC Radio's *AM*. Later that day, National Indigenous Television, an auxiliary channel of SBS, ran a similarly structured story on its evening news bulletin. Then the big news organisations lost interest again.



“The ability for us to create spaces for our own voices using these online platforms was the key starting point,” says writer Celeste Liddle.

Engagement with the story continued online, however. It was primarily driven by Indigenous people on social media who, according to research in 2014, use Twitter and Facebook at rates about 20 per cent higher than non-Indigenous Australians. So much so that a former member of the expert panel, Indigenous constitutional law expert Megan Davis, has noted, “If anyone wants to know what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are thinking on any political or legal issue, you go to social media. Since 2011 the message has been clear. Communities eschew recognition. They seek concrete reform to achieve practical outcomes.”

With the attention of the mainstream media directed elsewhere, Celeste Liddle’s *Guardian Australia* article attracted around 25,000 page views and over 10,000 shares on Twitter and Facebook, with similarly keen interest in her data analysis, published by IndigenousX.

The significant differences between the two surveys went beyond the raw results. As Liddle wrote, “Questions were asked by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people all over social media: who did Recognise survey? What did they ask them? What were

the respondents actually indicating that they supported? The media release was big on the figures and light on the details.”

In contrast, IndigenousX made every effort at transparency, with Liddle’s analysis detailing the eight survey questions posed, all responses for each question and all sample sizes for each question. It included repeated disclaimers about the shortcomings of self-selective surveys of this kind, as well as open acknowledgement that the overall sample size of 827 Indigenous respondents was not representative of the diversity of views of all blackfellas. In comparison, the initial release of the Recognise poll results made no such details available to the public, other than its sample size of 750 Indigenous respondents.

“That IndigenousX survey confirms to me,” Noel Pearson told listeners, “that the whole process going forward has got to allow Indigenous people to have the debate and have the discussion right across the country.”

In a blog post on Recognise’s website in response to Liddle’s analysis and *Guardian Australia* article, campaign co-director Tim Gartrell provided more detail about the question put to respondents and the methods deployed by Polity Research, who conducted the poll. “We have never denied there is dissent nor that there are critics of the movement,” wrote Gartrell. “We simply disagree on the scale of it. We listen to our opponents and we respect their right to a different view.”

The initial omission of details, however, was enough for opponents to vehemently dismiss the findings. And, says Luke Pearson, the ongoing lack of any discernible model of proposed amendment only contributed to the increasing suspicions and frustrations within the ranks of the Indigenous opposition.

“When they said 87 per cent of Indigenous people would vote Yes if the referendum was held tomorrow, it was completely meaningless,” says Pearson. “It was like Recognise were saying, ‘87 per cent of Indigenous people would sign their name to a blank bit of paper that the government is going to fill in later.’ Really? Aboriginal people have said that? That’s not possible, because us blackfellas do not sign our fucking names to blank bits of paper for the government to fill in later.”

As Indigenous digital networks kept the story alive on social media, the IndigenousX survey data was beginning to have a wider impact. On 25 June it entered Hansard when senator Nova Peris alluded to it in a speech on the report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Around the same time, Cape York lawyer Noel Pearson, another former member of Julia Gillard's expert panel, used the data in an interview with Brisbane's 98.9FM to argue for a series of Indigenous-only community conferences.

"That IndigenousX survey confirms to me," Pearson told listeners, "that the whole process going forward has got to allow Indigenous people to have the debate and have the discussion right across the country."

The following month, Abbott invited forty hand-picked Indigenous delegates to Kirribilli House in Sydney to devise an acceptable way to proceed with the issue. The brimmed hats of Noel Pearson and Pat Dodson were prominent among the invitees.

During meetings with the PM and opposition leader Bill Shorten, the Indigenous leaders rejected a symbolic, "minimalist" approach to recognition and sought substantive constitutional change. The PM rejected their proposal, later describing it as "something akin to a log of claims unlikely to receive general support." He also roundly rejected Pearson and Dodson's push for a series of Indigenous conferences. They would soon go ahead anyway, however.

"Until that point, pretty much the only thing we were seeing from Recognise were things like the long walk and sponsorship," says Celeste Liddle. "It was very much this corporate-focused entity that seemed more interested in getting the big millionaires to sign on and don the R-logo than actually consulting with the community. The survey made people think, 'Well, hang on. A bunch of community members really don't seem that happy with this at all. What's going on? Maybe we need to talk to them?'"

Tanja Dreher, who teaches communications and media studies at the University of Wollongong, describes the survey as a savvy intervention. Her own research has focused on community media, experiences of racism, and news and cultural diversity. She says the survey "cut through" because it took the form of an opinion poll. "Though

we can argue that the methodology was not as robust as it should be, playing the numbers or working those marketing techniques is the absolute bread and butter of legacy media,” she says. “And that’s why it did finally cut through and shift how that debate is now made public, who’s involved, and what’s happening. Even though at that moment you still see evidence of the legacy media really playing catch-up, slow to realise what was happening in other channels, particularly Indigenous new media and social media channels.”

Until the publication of the survey results, IndigenousX was known only as a Twitter account engaged in cultural activism. Its website, launched in September 2014, mainly functioned as a repository for interviews with each of its weekly hosts. In the early years, host Aaron Nagas took Aldi and Big W to task over culturally offensive t-shirts, compelling them to remove the items from their shelves. Best & Less was soon caught out over the same issue, and it too removed its stock. Another success came when the Macquarie Dictionary corrected its entry for the word “boong,” and yet another when IndigenousX raised around \$10,000 for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation.

More recently, @IndigenousX has become an influential voice in a loose coalition of activist organisations and individuals pushing to change the date of Australia’s official national day on the basis that 26 January represents a history of violent dispossession for First Nations people.

“There was a time there for a year or two, where people were just reaching out on social media going, ‘Hey, just letting you know there’s a golliwog in a shop, or there’s a racist dude who said something,’ or whatever it was,” says Pearson. “If somebody saw something racist on social media or had put it up on Facebook or Twitter, someone would say, ‘Tell IndigenousX!’ And we would do something about it to try and change it.”

Before @IndigenousX, Pearson and his older brother ran what he describes as “mini-campaigns” to raise the profiles of Indigenous Twitter accounts belonging to organisations such as the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Healing Foundation, and Yindjibarndi. In those days, the account

went under a different handle and Pearson was working on it twelve to eighteen hours each day.

“My older brother Sean joined up just to back me up, because I was still fighting with racist trolls back then. But we got around to helping out other Indigenous accounts,” he says. “I had 4000 followers or something, which was big back then. One day I thought, ‘Why should I have 4000 following me when people actually doing shit don’t have that?’”

It was during this period that the Pearson brothers played a little-known role in advocating the eventual “act of partnership” between international surf-clothing giant Mambo and fledgling surf brand Mabo, a commercial venture by Malcolm Mabo, son of the renowned land rights campaigner Eddie Koiki Mabo. The 2011 brand dispute resulted in the re-release of Mambo’s 1992 “100% Mabo” t-shirt, with sale proceeds going towards kickstarting Malcolm Mabo’s new project. The brothers were also behind Google’s decision to alter its search algorithms to stop racist jokes appearing at the top of Aboriginal-related search results. “That was the first thing we did where I was like, ‘Wow. I can affect real-world change doing this,’” says Pearson.

The idea of @IndigenousX had been on Pearson’s mind for six months before he finally, and coincidentally, launched it at a 2012 youth-led constitutional recognition conference at the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence in Redfern. Pearson was to speak on a panel alongside former NSW senator Aden Ridgeway and Kirstie Parker, who was editor of the Indigenous-owned newspaper, the *Koori Mail*. A room full of young future leaders had assembled to hear about media and communications campaigning strategies. When it was Pearson’s turn to speak, he says he threw away his talk and instead sent a sheet of paper around the room.

“I got up and said, ‘Fuck it. I’m doing it. I’m going to pass this around and you fellas put your name down on there and you will be the first round of IndigenousX,” says Pearson. “I’d been sitting on the idea for ages, not confident I could sustain it, but in that room there was all these deadly young fellas who were already on Twitter.”

Pearson donated his substantial Twitter following and shuffled his own name across to a personal account. Rotating curator accounts were far from common on Twitter at the time. “By the time I actually launched it there was @Sweden, which is run by the Swedish government with a different Swedish citizen each week. Technically they are the first rotating account on Twitter in the world. @IndigenousX is the second,” he says. Rotating accounts like @EduTweetOz and @WePublicHealth followed, each acknowledging the influence of @IndigenousX.

“I did it because I had a platform and I could do it,” says Pearson. “When I realised that the account was working, I leveraged it. I messaged all the organisations I’d helped out along the way to just say, ‘Hi, I might be in your town sometime soon. I want to come in and say g’day.’ And, though no one knew who I was then, most went, ‘Come on in, we’d love to meet you.’”

In 2013, Pearson was approached by *Guardian Australia*, a new entrant on the Australian media scene. Katharine Viner, its founding editor, had been following @IndigenousX on Twitter and says she was intrigued by the range of experiences covered via the mechanism of rotating hosts. She asked her opinion editor, Jessica Reed, to find out who was behind the account and talk to them about a partnership.

“When I arrived in Australia in January 2013, I was looking for gaps in what was covered by the media,” says Viner. “It seemed to me that the gaps then were around asylum and immigration, political policy, and Indigenous issues. As someone fascinated by Australian history, the issue of the rights of Indigenous Australians seemed to me to be glanced over. I wanted to find a way for the *Guardian* to cover that, and was keen that it wouldn’t be top-down reporting. The account was one of the most interesting things we could see in the Australian media and we thought if we collaborated we could perhaps find ways for the work to reach even more people — readers all around the world.”

“The stories were powerful. They were affecting and revealing,” says *Guardian* editor Katharine Viner.

Pearson was invited to the *Guardian's* office in Sydney, but says he was so unaware of media generally that he had no idea it was setting up in Australia. "I thought they were doing an Australian-focused single edition and wanted to interview IndigenousX," he says.

Viner recalls that Pearson was full of ideas and it quickly made sense to work in tandem with IndigenousX and effectively hire Pearson as a content curator. They decided that *Guardian Australia* would profile the weekly @IndigenousX hosts with a Q&A about their lives and the issues they were interested in. Viner believed this simple approach would reveal a broad Indigenous experience for the *Guardian's* predominantly non-Indigenous readers.

Anticipating a hostile reception by Australia's long-established news media players, says Pearson, the *Guardian* group seemed determined to do Aboriginal affairs well. "They were quite open about it," he recalls. "They had ideas about how they wanted to go about it, but I suppose they knew if they didn't do something significant, organisations like the *Australian* would have destroyed them."

Viner was impressed by the diversity and range of Indigenous perspectives delivered by the partnership, which she says included community organisers, students, professionals, public figures, and little-known activists. "The stories were powerful. They were affecting and revealing," she says. "We also found good writers that way, such as Kelly Briggs and Siv Parker. It gave space to so many different angles and lived experiences — the kind we didn't see anywhere else.

"We understand that a lot of stories are better told by the people who are living it, or who are close to their communities and what is happening every day. Our job, as journalists, is to go out and find those stories — and collaboration is a great tool to get this done."

In the half-decade since the launch of @IndigenousX, new media entrants and social media have had a revolutionary impact on journalism and the relations between news media and civic and political communication. New journalistic and organisational values and practices have rapidly replaced the old ways, and continue to evolve. For

the most part, media observers agree that Australia's legacy news organisations have been slow to react and have subsequently suffered through a combination of short-sightedness and obstinacy. *Guardian Australia* was the first international new-media news venture to land on the local mediascape.

Digital media behemoth *BuzzFeed* followed in 2014, and *HuffPost* arrived in August 2015 in partnership with Fairfax Media. Then, in May 2017, the *New York Times* bustled onto the scene.

Add in small news and opinion outlets like *Crikey*, *New Matilda* and *Independent Australia*, plus the hard pivot to online news at the ABC, and the local news market has opened up a profusion of opportunities for otherwise marginalised voices. Meanwhile, social media has enabled a proliferation of Indigenous news and opinion "participant-users."

"Everything was just moving that way, towards blogs or blog-style op-eds," says Pearson. "I had my own blog, and there was Celeste, Amy McGuire, Leesa Watego and other people. We had already been getting recognised by various institutions."

Celeste Liddle, who now regularly writes for Fairfax Media in addition to her popular blog *Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist*, says big media outlets have responded to the way many people prefer to seek out new online spaces and the perspectives filling them. "The ability for us to create spaces for our own voices using these online platforms was the key starting point," she says. "*Guardian* and Fairfax and the rest saw that most people were shifting to online and social for their news. They knew that if they were smart about it, they could recruit these sorts of voices which had been ignored before, but generated some online pull because they were seen as alternatives."

While acknowledging that these new outlets can provide strong paths to self-determination and greater diversity, Tanja Dreher warns that they also create what she describes as "tensions" for traditional community media. "There's an enormous amount of excitement and enthusiasm about the opportunities enabling First Nations in terms of social media," she says. "But one of the reasons to be wary is because

government funding bodies are very happy to use that enthusiasm as a rationale for stepping back from, or cutting funding for community media.”

Community radio and community television remain vital, Dreher argues. “For many First Nations communities, Indigenous community media is actually *the* mainstream media: it’s not a marginal kind of extra or whatever. It is *the* crucial information and cultural communication resource.”

Dreher believes that parts of the community media model can’t be easily replicated by social media. She describes the development of relationships at routine times and at a set location as the sorts of strong ties that are too often neglected in the social media sphere. “Building a relationship with the station as well as with the community, as well as with other broadcasters has certain values in terms of sustainability, in terms of collective action, in terms of building an ongoing project that might have a charter,” she says. “This is where there are central values that you sign onto, and commit to. And that you contribute to.”

The week after @IndigenousX successfully campaigned to have Aldi and Big W remove clothing bearing the slogan “Australia Est. 1788” from their shelves, Indigenous businessman and conservative commentator Warren Mundine was approached by the *Daily Telegraph*’s Jason Morrison for comment. Asked about his views on @IndigenousX’s intervention, Mundine was reported to have described it as a “load of huffing and puffing about rubbish” before adding, “We’ve got Aboriginal kids with health problems and kids not going to school — if you want to get fired up about something, try that... not a bloody t-shirt.”

Luke Pearson responded to the comments on his own blog at the time:

During that same week on Twitter Aaron talked about a huge range of issues, including the fact that he helped establish the Australian Indigenous Basketball Championships, Marriage equality, everyday racism, Climate Change, education as well as help raise awareness for many Indigenous Organisations/events by giving them a plug, and I myself was promoting a fundraising campaign trying to raise funds to print and distribute an independently made Elders Report into Indigenous Youth Suicide.

Warren Mundine recalls that while he didn't see the Aldi and Big W actions as "greatly important" at the time, they did highlight for him the potential of new media for effecting change for Indigenous people.

"It said to me, 'Hey, we can get our message out there and we can bring our people along with us without having to go through the old media, or the mainstream media,'" he says. "That message wouldn't have got out before. But it showed that through new media you could reach a lot more people who could then put pressure on big firms, challenge big organisations and make changes."

Mundine says he now accesses new media for his news because it provides him with things he wouldn't otherwise hear about, except along the traditional "black grapevine."

"You see something in the Indigenous new media and then a day or so later you might pick up a story in the mainstream media about it," he says. "I'm seeing things that I wouldn't usually see, stories that I would normally not hear of. Previously, you couldn't get our voices out there because the mainstream media only went to a few select people, and I'm one of them. They'd come looking for a story, but now we can bypass that gatekeeping."

Katharine Viner, now the London-based editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, says the success of the IndigenousX collaboration has recently led to a similar initiative in its US newsroom. "We've started a project which is a collaboration with smaller newsrooms across America to find stories that national outlets either undercover or miss completely. This project was driven by Jessica Reed, the opinion editor who got in touch with Luke Pearson in the first place. Their work together in 2013 has paved the way."

Viner sees the trend in journalism increasingly shifting towards collaborative partnerships as news organisations become more globally focused and financially stretched.

“Whether it’s 400-plus journalists working together to produce the Panama papers or *Guardian Australia* and IndigenousX, it produces better journalism, of course, and much greater impact,” she says. “In the case of IndigenousX, it means that the work can get a large audience in Australia and also a large audience around the world, connecting with interested communities in places like the US, the UK, Canada and Europe.”

Luke Pearson says that Indigenous X’s collaboration with the *Guardian* simply aims to open up a new, more inclusive discussion. That endeavour is still a work in progress, but it is clear that it has already helped a rapidly changing media landscape to amplify underrepresented voices. “It’s fair to say that in Australia, the *Guardian* did it and then everyone else did it,” he says. “All the dominoes didn’t tip over at the same time. I can say with confidence that IndigenousX was a significant part of the shifting landscape and that the collaboration with the *Guardian* was one of the first major positive changes in that media landscape.” •